

The Long Way Back

This is the story of a small expedition sent from Africa to search the legendary island of Britain for traces of a possible civilization. The time is in the future, some centuries after Europe has been devastated by atomic warfare. There is a legend that man still survives in Britain. Somewhere in the heart of the country, it is said, a city is hidden, a golden city, but the inhabitants never speak of it except when they are dying, and no-one knows where it is.

Led by a woman, the expedition of scientists finds a land of dense forests, inhabited by packs of huge ravening dogs, tigers, and miniature horses and cows. Finally they discover a tribe of primitive stone-age people, who speak a corrupt English, and live in fear of a God called Thay who, in the distant past, caused a great blast to destroy all life.

The expedition's presence is resented by everyone except Brown, the only surviving Briton intelligent enough to seek knowledge and to dream of a future when Britain will be great again. The story of the expedition's adventures, their rescue by Brown, and their discovery of the secret city, makes exciting reading.

The Long Way Back

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Chapter One

THE APPOINTMENT had been made for three a.m. Grame was punctual, although it had taken him eight hours to climb the free track up the shoulder of the Mountain. When he arrived, it took him less than eight minutes to discover that he was alone in the building with the night guard.

'Patience is demanded,' the man said to him, marching up and down the small ante-room, while the hot light from the walls barred his black face with silver. 'The machine-staff arrives at seven.'

'Do you think I could go out and find a tobacco-room somewhere?'

'You will lose your turn,' the guard said, continuing to march.

'But there's no one else here.'

'No talking to the guard,' the guard said, turning with a smart double stamp.

'Then I'll go out and find a tobacco-room,' Grame said.

'No exit without an exit pass signed by the controller—and he won't be here till seven.'

'I'll go to sleep,' Grame said. He stood up and stretched himself as if he hoped to pull the roof down.

The guard went on marching. 'No sleeping in the ante-room,' he said to the wall in front of him.

'What about death?' Grame asked him. 'Is death allowed in the ante-room?'

He lifted his hands a little, bending the fingers experi-

mentally, and began to walk up and down beside the guard.

'It is indifferent to me if you kill me,' the guard said. 'I have marched up and down in this room every night for thirty years.' Tears began to drop from his eyes, but his emotion was not strong enough to affect his feet. He marched on. 'Six paces across the room and six paces back,' he said.

'I'm going to sleep,' Grame said in a calmer voice. 'Don't stop me, guard.'

He lay down on the floor. The guard marched on, pretending not to see him. Grame watched the tears that still ran from the old man's eyes. Outside the huts, on summer evenings, he had seen other old men cry. He was glad he hadn't been forced to strike this one.

He slept until the morning, when the other applicants began to arrive, stumbling over him, trampling on his arms and chest, as they came through the doorway. They were in higher grades than his; that was why they had been asked at a friendlier hour. Some of them looked at Grame with surprise, as though he had been a lemon growing on an orange tree, then turned away, content to suppose that a ridiculous but wholly irrelevant mistake had been made.

Two yellow boys brought in coffee, and as they drank it some of the applicants began to rehearse their claims in whispers.

'... to be on the censors' panel—flair, gift, practice—oh, yes, practice—only privately ...' '... Air bus pilot 369 ten years' experience flying, qualified for express trans-continental duties ...' '... Small crimes manager here by appointment applying as already stated for vacant post of assistant director of serious crime. ...'

More applicants arrived, and the whispering went on ceaselessly, like the buzzing of flies against a window pane.

At seven the official staff entered, and pushed their way without interest through the packed ante-room. At nine, Grame was called.

He fixed a smile on his face, walked briskly through the door, and down the ramp for sixty strides. He was deeper in the earth than he had ever been before, and in front of him stood the biggest machine in the world. When he came in, it was purring feebly like a young kitten, but at sight of him it gave an experimental shriek, and then told him to move forward.

He looked in appeal at the men, but their eyes were on the machine, or on the parts of it for which each was responsible. He advanced reluctantly, stood, and turned, while the machine took an X-ray photograph of his skull; a superficial photograph of his person; an impression of his finger-prints; a record of his voice; and a sample of his blood.

One of the machine-tenders moved a lever, and the conversation began.

'You, Grame, mechanical-repetitive worker, hut 498, age 24 years on this fifteenth day of March, Add 3,406, why do you apply for regrading?' The record stopped, and the machine was silent, waiting for Grame to feed propositions on to its tape. 'These propositions, separated from their emotional adornments, would pass through the selector to emerge as a wave-length that could pick up the correct replies.

Grame was silent for a moment. He had prepared arguments flexible enough to outwit an enemy or to impress a friend, but not to affect the responses of a machine.

'I was graded as a mechanical-repetitive worker at the age of seven,' he began uneasily.

'Were you graded by men or by machine?'

'I was passed through the grading machine.'

‘Then no mistake was made. Men make mistakes, machines do not.’

‘Children can alter,’ Grame said. He was speaking carefully, trying to suppress his hatred of the grading system. ‘The child grows and sees the world and wants to have an interesting place in it. Perhaps the boy of seven who can’t move button two on the machine will turn into the boy of seventeen who can build a machine of his own.

The machine digested this. ‘Have you any complaints about your education?’

‘I was educated like the other mech-rep children. Two hours daily speed and accuracy practice in press-button and pull-lever techniques; simple arithmetic; label reading; annual lectures on food values and biology.’

‘Have you any complaints about your education?’ the machine repeated, without altering its previous inflections.

‘It wasn’t an education at all,’ Grame said. ‘But I’ve educated myself. I’ve taught myself to read and write and think. I’ve taught myself science and high-level mathematics. In every factory I’ve worked in I’ve been round every department and mastered every process. I’ve been studying physics for years. I am prepared to produce as evidence formulae that I believe to be original. I will welcome examination by any body of professional physicists. I claim that my proper career is in physics,’ he said, beginning to shout at the machine.

‘Have you any complaints about the food in your hut?’ the machine asked calmly.

‘I don’t want to talk about food. I want to talk about my life. I want to work in physics.’

There was an unprecedented silence of several seconds, then the machine spoke again.

‘You must explain clearly the work you want to do.’

‘I want to study cosmic rays.’

The machine put up a no-response signal. It had not been equipped to discuss cosmic rays. One of the attendants pulled a lever, and speech emerged again.

‘Have you any complaints about conditions in your hut? Have you an adequate tobacco-room?’

‘I don’t want to discuss tobacco-rooms. I want to appeal against my grading.’

‘Have you any complaints about sex facilities in your hut? Have you an adequate sex-cubicle?’

‘Damn sex facilities. I want to be regraded as a physicist. I appeal to you,’ Grame said wildly. ‘I appeal to you as a machine. I appeal to you for regrading.’

‘You have already been graded. You have given no reason to be regraded. Have you any complaints about physical recreation?’

‘I won’t talk to this machine,’ Grame cried angrily to the machine-tenders. ‘It’s puerile.’ The adjective, being merely a subjective emotional term, was ignored by the machine, but one of the attendants, who had seemed indifferent to the conversation, pulled a switch and the machine began to speak in different tones.

‘Look at this thing reasonably,’ it said. ‘So far as civilisation goes, we think we’ve evolved something pretty decent for people in general. Food, religion, and sex for all. That’s a pretty big achievement, isn’t it? And don’t forget that our sanitary arrangements are excellent. We’ve also given every consideration to the filling of leisure hours, and we’re really rather proud of the results. But we must never forget that work is part of the picture, and that’s where the grading machine comes in. It’s a rather miraculous machine, when you think of it. And what does it do? It ensures that everyone gets the job he’s fit for, the job he can do with satisfaction and pride, and isn’t made miserable by struggling with something that’s just that little bit beyond his powers.’

‘Regrading?’ Grame said desperately. ‘What about my regrading?’

‘The grading machine acts in the interests of the people graded,’ the machine went on smoothly. ‘It fits all the round pegs snugly into the round holes, where they have no chance to grow uncomfortable square corners. And the grading machine doesn’t suffer from human fallibility. It is always right.’

‘But I came here to prove it isn’t.’

‘Next, please,’ the machine said indifferently.

Grame stood still. ‘The grading machine is never right,’ he said. ‘I don’t think it works at all. It couldn’t tell the difference between a rabbit and a crocodile. It works on percentages and it knows nothing more. It just puts through 30 per cent mechanical-repetitives; 25 per cent soldiers; 20 per cent farmers, and so on. It doesn’t grade children. It deals them into heaps. The machine’s wrong. Always and forever wrong. Machines know nothing about people. They can give information about the number of colour-blind road-sweepers who are likely to break their legs in the next twenty-five years, but they don’t know what a road-sweeper thinks. Machines can give information, but they have no emotions, they can’t imagine, they can’t set their own problems. They can’t understand people who imagine and hope. Machines aren’t even infantile.’

‘Next please,’ the machine repeated.

‘The machine is wrong,’ Grame shouted. ‘Always and forever wrong.’

The machine began to hum impatiently. Two of the attendants seized their tools and moved towards the giant doors.

‘Wrong!’ Grame shouted. ‘And people know it. They’re tired of being graded by idiotic lumps of steel and electricity. The people will destroy the grading machine. What do you think we mech-reps talk about when we put the

Drunk and Angry notice on the door and the officers are frightened to come in? We talk about smashing the machines and throwing the pieces in your works. We talk about high explosives and bombs.'

The humming changed to an electrical crackling.

'You'll buzz a lot harder when the bomb goes up under you,' Grame shouted.

The crackling developed into a rumbling of minor explosions. Flashes of white light leapt out of the apertures. There was a noise like a waterfall, then, for a few moments, absolute silence and absolute stillness except for the smoke that whirled around the machine.

One of the attendants spoke.

'It will take weeks to get it going again,' he said bitterly. 'Well, the regrading will have to be done by hand, that's all. I'm not working overtime on this baby.'

'What's going to happen to me?' Grame asked. 'Exemplary death?'

'We don't care what happens to you. Not our business or we'd strangle you now. Better go through that door and talk to one of the controllers.'

Grame walked up the ramp towards the centre of the building and kept walking until the machine was far beneath him.

He went through a door marked sub-controller. A man was sitting at a desk, reading the morning papers.

'I've wrecked the machine,' Grame told him. 'I was arguing with it.'

The sub-controller sighed and put down the newspaper. 'There will be a penalty,' he said.

'I came to be regraded. I want to study cosmic rays. It had never heard of cosmic rays. I suppose it lost its temper.'

'The machine never loses its temper. Without any desire to be alarming, I had better tell you that this is a serious

matter. It's very serious indeed,' he said sighing. 'You see, the machine is state property. Practically everything is, after all.'

'It makes no difference,' Grame said gloomily. 'No difference to me, anyway. I'm a mechanical-repetitive. I knew I wouldn't be regraded. So did the other mech-reps. You may take it as a fact, he said spitefully, 'that you'll have trouble when you've killed me.'

The sub-controller looked at him with sudden geniality. as though he had just recognised another sub-controller. 'Oh, you're the mech-rep, are you? And you've wrecked the machine? My dear fellow, my dear potential martyr, why are you so against the machine? It may not be always right, but it gives you just the answers you'd get from us, only in a more concise and less irritating form. When answers have to be given a hundred times a day, six days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, and a hundred years in every century, it saves time and temper to have a machine to give them. Do you know that before the machine was built, we recorded twenty thousand interviews, purely in order to ensure that the machine was fitted with every correct response, and with nothing but correct responses? Before my time of course. Now, we'll say nothing more about penalties. Come back in a month's time and try again. I'll have some of the boys fit it with a cosmic ray reaction.'

'I won't come back in a month. I'll stay and be killed now if I can't be regraded.'

'But there wouldn't be any point in regrading you. We simply don't have any vacancies in the cosmic ray team. Nothing that would interest you, anyway. You don't want to be a cosmic bottle-washer?'

Grame sat down, trembling. 'Kill me,' he begged, 'but without jokes.'

'Now, that's where the machine is superior,' the sub-

controller pointed out, immensely pleased. 'It doesn't make these little jokes you rightly find so annoying. The machine doesn't get bored. It never feels the need to entertain itself. You illustrate my point perfectly. We most certainly mustn't kill you. Now, let me see. Science is your line. Scientific investigation. We can't fit you into cosmic rays. Sit there and relax: I'll have a word with our science man.'

He tipped his chair back and pressed a button with his knee.

'Oh, Lore,' he said. 'I've a man I rather want to fit into one of your teams. What? Oh, he fancies cosmic rays. What? Yes, I know. Any other vacancies? Oh, have you? Have you really? When was that decided? Oh, so it's their idea? And exactly what are the minimum qualifications? Yes, I suppose he could. And it's the only vacancy? Positively? Well, it sounds perfectly splendid. He'll love that. When do you want him? I say! I suppose it can be done. We'll have a chat later in the day, when I see how things are going. Good-bye.'

He settled down in his chair, and beamed at Grame.

'What would you say to a really cushy job in anthropology? We're sending a team to investigate primitive Britain. Yes, I know what you're going to say. It's not quite cosmic rays. Admittedly it's not even physics. But there are myriads, positively myriads, of interesting facts to be discovered about these primitive races. It's a science we've inevitably neglected. Nearly as far back as our history goes it's been safer to stay where we are and mind our own business. We did send out a few expeditions once, I believe, but none of them ever returned. And yet what an enthralling business anthropology is!' he said musingly. 'I've always claimed it's a pity we couldn't have kept the Boers in their natural state. I'm afraid they've degenerated a little in their reserve—soil erosion—religious riots—in-

breeding. But in spite of it all, there's something to be learnt, even from them, although I'm afraid our anthropologists will get a little restive if they're asked to spend all their time studying the Boers. Anyway, there it is. The expedition will fly to Britain in an Amphibian on one of the longest flights ever attempted. But you need have no fears on that score—Amphibians always get there, or so I'm told.' He stopped, and looked at Grame impatiently 'Well?'

'If you're offering me a job,' Grame said numbly, 'could you perhaps tell me what it is?'

'You know I'm offering you a job. And don't refuse it too quickly. Think it over. Take your time.' He looked at his watch. 'I can give you five minutes more. Remember, this job is important. It isn't just science for the sake of science. We're beginning to believe that if we're to survive we must find why other people didn't. We don't think the Britons ever got very far, and we don't know how they stopped. There's a legend, you know, that they ended with what our own primitive forebears called the Big Bang, but one mustn't place too much credence on folklore. We haven't much else to go on, unfortunately. Our own superstitious ancestors rather foolishly destroyed every record of white civilisation they could lay their ignorant hands on. Only a few scraps of their literature survive—you know the way—odd pages used to pad out the back of picture frames—that kind of thing. They've all been micro-filmed and machine-digested, but they don't tell us very much.'

Grame was listening to him with the despair of a man who is being sold a rowing-boat when he wants an aeroplane. 'Cosmic rays,' he said weakly.

'However,' the sub-controller went on smoothly, 'Britain is unexplored territory, and we're sending in a team—geologists, physiologists, archaeologists—everyone relevant we can spare. It leaves in twenty-four hours, and there are

one or two things you'll have to do before you go. There's a primitive intensive history course going on now. Room 26, University building. You'll just make it. I should think if you spent eight hours on that and managed a pass mark, you could drop into geology and anthropology, which are less exacting; pick up your temperate zone clothing; get back to your hut to say good-bye; and join the others in time for the final briefing. Depart to-morrow from the airport at 9 a.m. Transport to the hut and back again will be provided. You would never walk it in the time, although I must say that you seem to have a most remarkable physique. Anyway, that's the job. You'll have to take it or leave it, and take it or leave it instantly, because I am afraid that your five minutes is over.' He looked at his watch again. 'Yes or no?'

'Yes,' Gramc said.

The sub-controller stood up.

'Don't forget to tell them at your hut that we've given you moderately good treatment, old boy,' he said. 'And thanks for a most interesting chat.'

Chapter Two

PRIMITIVE HISTORY was going on in Room 26, but it was not, as Grame had feared, being conducted by a machine. A man stood on the platform. He looked dazed, like someone who had been dug out of a mine disaster. His eyes were closed, his face damp as a frog's belly, and words poured out of him as though he were worked by hydraulic pressure.

'... dawn of history,' he was saying. 'In that dark continent of Europe primitive man evolved his own primitive civilisation, living first in caves and trees, soon growing potatoes, wheat and catching fish, erecting stone buildings. These have been observed by some of our diving units in the drowned city of Paree, or Amstram as it was sometimes called. These people were deficient in all the arts but if legend is to be trusted they were excessively militaristic. Their armies ravaged the whole of the now submerged area of Western Europe. We have no exact evidence,' he said, and choked.

He stood rocking on his feet for a minute, trying to bring out the next words. None of the fifty or so people in the room whispered. They observed him closely, a clinical specimen strangled by knowledge. The pause lengthened. The lecturer's eyes began to bulge.

'Disqualified,' said a voice, and he collapsed on the platform. Two other students carried him quickly across the room and dropped him outside the door.

The next candidate stood up.

'We have no exact evidence,' he said smoothly, 'of the demarcation of the Russian boundary, but Russia was probably a colony of the Romans, an even mightier military race than the Britons. These Romans led by the ancient hero Napoleon brought roads and laws to the Russians. Fragments of the literature of the period still exist and may be seen in preservative solution in our Grand Museum, which is worth visiting if only to see the reassembled skull of the first man in the world, confidently asserted to be at least twenty thousand years old, and bearing a strange similarity we are told to certain members of the ape family. Britain finally attacked the Romans, the Russians and the Americans, and then— and then—and then . . .' his eyes began to roll, and just as it seemed that he was going to choke like his predecessor, he cried: 'Dogs were kept as pets in Britain, ball games were played, one of their heroes was called Crom Well. Another was Quix Ot. No literature survives to portray the mighty rising of the sea that brought Western Europe to its end and nothing more than legend to describe the fierce tornado which destroyed every trace of civilisation in the Americas if civilisation existed there before the yellow men. Some furious convulsion evidently occurred in this dawn of history and is known to have afflicted our own continent of Africa in a lesser degree. Something to do with ice, it may have been. Even here we have no written history of events of that period although legend says white slaves were once imported to this part of Kenya to work on our own primitive farms. Our Boers are the only surviving descendants. The Boers may be seen on their encampment on Mondays and Thursdays admission three danceri. No student of history should miss this.' He stopped and shut his eyes.

'Pass,' said a voice. 'Next.'

Another man walked to the platform. Grame stopped listening, and thought sombrely about his prospects. He

was aware that the determination with which he had approached the day had already dwindled. He had come to make a stand, and someone, although not the machine, had outwitted him. They were giving him just enough of a job to keep him quiet, and to pacify the other mech-reps. They were sending him back to the hut as a bought man, and to Britain as a useless appendage. His spirits began to rise when he realised that at least he was escaping from the life of the mech-rep, and to sink again he remembered that he was further than ever from the physics department. When his mind returned to the platform it was to hear the words:

‘When men lived in caves and trees they soon learnt to grow potatoes, wheat, catch fish, erect stone buildings.’

‘But he’s saying the same thing as the other!’ Grame said in surprise to his neighbour, a tall, nervous man, who was sitting on his hands to keep them still.

‘He has to,’ the man replied.

‘Why?’

‘How else could information be passed on?’

‘But . . .’

‘You’d better listen. It’ll be your turn in forty-eight hours.’

‘I’m not staying for forty-eight hours.’

‘Do you mean you’ve only been sent in for twenty-four? Some of us are here for a week.’

‘You listen to the same thing all the time?’

‘This is only part one. We do part two at eleven. Dress, social customs, religion. Part three is art and munitions. Even in twenty-four hours you’ll hear them all fifty times.’

‘I’m going to sleep,’ Grame muttered. He had left home at six the previous evening, and it had taken him eight hours to climb the long shoulder of the mountain. He closed his eyes.

‘Better not,’ his neighbour advised him. ‘Anyone who

falls asleep is regraded at once as a mech-rep and sent to a producing unit.' He shuddered.

Grame looked at him quickly, wondering if he should confide his own status, but his neighbour was already looking at the platform, like a prisoner waiting for the judge's decision, so Grame sat still, trying to grasp the little pellet of consciousness that slipped through the mists in his head, while seven speakers ascended the platform and repeated part one, sometimes with small variations.

The fifth speaker invented a new phrase—the potato-grubbing and fish-catching civilisation of Ancient Russia—and this was adopted by the sixth and seventh speakers.

When the morning break for the smoke-room was announced, Grame went out with his exhausted neighbour. They stood together, choking and gasping in the clouds of smoke that surged through the floor and walls. Grame didn't speak until they had reeled out again.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'How long has this been going on?'

'It's been going on for hundreds of years. We stay till we've learnt the lesson and then we become the teachers and recite what we've learnt to the new pupils. In a few days they become the teachers and we do the anthropology course in the same way and then get certified. It goes on for ever,' he said in a voice of the deepest respect. 'I don't quarrel with the system myself. It ensures continuity of tradition.'

'Wouldn't printing it all in a book be better?'

'If books were free for all then anyone could read them and call themselves anything. No member of a profession, particularly no anthropologist, would care for that at all. We're pretty exclusive, you know. Carefully selected, and all that. You can't be an anthropologist unless you're machine-admitted as suitable, and then you must pass the listening and lecturing test. It's only after that you're

allowed to read the books. I'm finishing this afternoon. It's my seventh day, and I might say in the time I've acquired a pretty lasting affection for the old place.'

'I'm finishing to-day,' Grame said when they got back to the lecture-hall. 'So I'll do my part one now.' He jumped on the platform.'

'In the early days of history these primitive inhabitants,' he began, and droned through to the end without faults. He thought that he'd never before heard himself talk such tedious nonsense. He was unaware that some of it had sunk into his mind for ever, so that when he thought of Britain the words 'primitive inhabitants . . . caves . . . potatoes . . .' automatically appeared in his mind.

By the early afternoon he had absorbed and regurgitated all the lectures, including those on anthropology. He staggered from the anthropology room, clutching his degree.

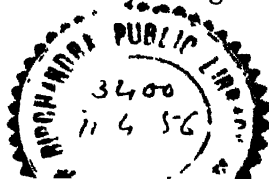
An official met him by the exit.

'Congratulations,' he said. 'I was told to look out for you and direct you to the geology room. It's all about U-shaped valleys and peneplains,' he added sympathetically. 'Room 49. But you can have five minutes in the tobacco-room first.'

Grame began to move towards the smoke-room he'd already visited.

'Not that one,' the official called after him. 'You're allowed to use the junior professional tobacco-room now. You're a qualified man, remember.'

Grame went to the new smoke-room. It did not give, as he had hoped, a better quality of smoke, but the other men who stood inhaling and coughing in the grey cloud were mistily different in character. They were junior professional men, and outside the room they stood in a group and talked in a sophisticated manner that was very strange to Grame.



‘Have you heard the latest ghastly news?’ one of them asked Grame. ‘A couple of domesticated lions have got loose in the nature reserve. If we don’t watch out they’ll breed. Can you imagine lions loose in the reserve! They might turn positively vicious. If something isn’t done they’ll get through the fence and eat all our Boers, and then what will happen to anthropology?’

His companion nodded. ‘My father’s often told me of the time some idiotic explorer brought some kangaroos from Australia. They bred madly, and everyone was absolutely terrified. The Council had to drop a gas cloud on the district. Of course all the animals including the harmless ones were killed, and the naturalists were absolutely enraged. A few hundred people didn’t get out in time—there’s a memorial to them in the Kikoora. But they were only farmers. Boers are different. We can’t gas the lions if it means killing off our Boers - or even moving them. It’s generally admitted they wouldn’t stand another move.’

‘Would it make any difference?’ a third asked cynically. ‘It’s also admitted they’re dying off at last. The Nature Council’s done everything humanly possible for them. They have a dozen doctors in there, and a team of at least five scientists working on every Boer, marking the way he turns his head, and how high he jumps when someone says Boo. I’ve always wished the Boers would say Boo to the anthropologists, but it never happens. An end’s an end, and they’re finished. No vitality.’

Grame, listening, felt that he had already moved into a wider world, where people could afford to be cynical about the Boers. He went on to the lightning geology course with more enthusiasm, hoping that he might emerge from it into a still higher form of smoke-room.

He was driven back to the hut that evening. When he left the car he was met by the political leader, a lamp-black shaven-head. He listened excitedly to Grame’s news,

and immediately urged him to form a secret unit in the exploration team.

'You'll find some like-thinkers,' he explained. 'Scientists are always on the side of the oppressed. Every scientist is at heart a political assassin.'

'I thought you didn't approve of assassination,' Grame said.

'Exactly,' the political leader answered with apparent satisfaction. 'I don't. That's what I was saying. It's up to you now to persuade the scientists to join us in a really bloodless revolution.'

Grame, watching, saw that the long sullen line of exhausted workers was already twisting slowly up the concrete hill. He left the political leader and stood at the gates until he saw Alric.

'Alric,' he said. 'I'm leaving. I've got a job.'

Alric's face lit up. 'In physics?'

'Not exactly. I'm going as an anthropologist in an expedition to explore Britain.'

'Oh, Grame,' Alric said. He looked away quickly, then shuffled a smile on to his face. 'Good luck!' he said coldly.

'I know, I know,' Grame said. 'I swore I'd get into physics or die. They've bought me off. I'm deserting you, and I've proved nothing. I know. You needn't tell me.'

'I'm not telling you,' Alric said heavily. 'Good-bye, Grame.' He slouched away, lurching wearily from one bare foot to the other.

When Oona arrived with the women he told her at once that he was going. She clung to him and kissed him violently, but she wouldn't go into the sex-cubicle with him.

'It would be a miserable memory,' she said in her loftiest and most irritating voice. 'You only want me symbolically, don't you understand. You want me to represent the hut. Through me, you'd be able to say good-bye to it for

ever. You choose to go away. And I choose to let you go without any emotion at all.'

'When it comes to that,' he said angrily, 'I can very well survive without the help of a cold-blooded super-logical secret novel-reading female mech-rep.'

'You see,' she said. 'I'm a mere mech-rep already.' She walked away from him without saying good-bye. It was accepted that he was deserting her. His other friends spoke to him uncomfortably. The congratulations and envy of the people for whom he cared very little gave him a much reduced form of pleasure.

There remained his mother, who had helped him through the long arduous years to this end, or at least to something like this end. When he found her, she looked as though she had been carved out of black rock. For ten minutes she would not speak at all. Then she shrieked that he was abandoning her, and shouted biological accusations at him. He sat with his eyes closed. When the worst of the scene was over, he tried to embrace her, but she stiffened against him, crying that he was like his father; an unanswerable charge from mother to son; although he made the mistake of trying to answer it.

'If you let me leave like this I'll never be your son again,' he threatened.

'Leave now,' she said.

He forced himself to kiss her unresponsive face, then left her, trying to destroy her memory as he turned away.

The political leader intercepted him as he hurried out of camp to the waiting car.

'Don't despise the primitive people,' he begged Grame. 'Win their confidence. Join, if possible, in their religious rites. Offer them small gifts.'

Grame pushed him off. He had no connection now with the hut nor with anyone in it.

Chapter Three

THE EXPEDITION,' the controller said, 'will be led by Valya. She's in the dedicated spinster class.'

'Led by a woman?' Grame asked in despair. 'A woman?' He wondered wildly if it was too late to apply for reinstatement as a mech-rep, and knew as he wondered that his severance with the hut had been bitter and complete. He might pretend that he had discovered in himself a vocation for the hermitage, but that would involve spending the rest of his life locked in a stone cell, trying to think about the Noble Abstraction. He discarded the idea instantly, and there was no other choice but death.

'A woman?' he repeated. 'That ought to be interesting.'

He followed the controller along the corridor, trying to assemble his thoughts about dedicated spinsters. They were one of the top grades, and, so far as he knew, no one ever liked them much. They were chosen at the age of fifteen; the requirements were high intelligence and strongly sexual natures. They were educated and indoctrinated for eighteen hours a day, and those who could stand the pace usually found their life's desire was to serve the State. Their swearing-in day was lush with tradition and mysticism. Most girls were married by an official with a typewriter, but the dedicated spinsters were taken to the Hall of the Abstraction. Everyone there was dressed in purple, except the girl, who wore white. Maids in purple attended her; the whole Council of Forty, in purple, bowed before her; a choir of little boys, in purple, sang. The President, acting

as proxy for the nation, put a ring on her finger; she swore loyalty for ever, and became a Bride of the State. After that, she was put in charge of a folklore-in-music unit, or became a manager of a railway branch line, or, perhaps, a parachutist.

'The energy these women have,' the controller whispered to Grame, when they were outside the room. 'You can put them on to anything and they'll drive it through.'

'I still wonder,' Grame began hesitantly.

'Don't waste time wondering about anything,' the controller interrupted. 'Valya has more driving power than any five men. The State has absolute confidence in her and she is to be absolutely obeyed.'

Grame walked into the room behind the controller, composing in his head a picture of a handsome grim woman of fifty. He was shocked when he found that Valya was young. She was a solid girl with awkward movements, a light-brown complexion, a stern profile, and a face that was soft and big-eyed when seen from the front. He made an instant decision to take orders from her only when it suited him.

She appeared to have no thoughts of any kind about him when the controller named him. She glanced round to make sure that all the crew was assembled, and then began to speak in a quick, deep voice.

'This is the time for honesty,' she said. 'The Council is worried by the lackadaisical state of the nation, and they have decided that to rouse us to what we were before, great deeds must be performed, and people's hearts raised again to enthusiasm and pride. We as a team have been selected to fly into the unknown and come back with knowledge; to meet every danger with absolute courage; and to perform our various tasks efficiently and with loyalty. We are only one of several teams being required,

in widely different ways, to achieve objectives that will fire the heart of the nation.'

'What's wrong with the heart of the nation, anyway?' a voice whispered.

Valya looked quickly round the room, without being able to decide who had interrupted.

'Soldiers desert from the army,' she said in a level voice, 'miners don't want to go down into the earth; mothers hide their children to avoid the grading machine; people walk past the news boards without reading them; and political meetings can't be held without a conscripted audience. Alcohol is being sold openly, and in your hut,' she said, turning her earnest gaze on Grame, 'I am told that three times in the last week the Drunk and Angry notice has been hung outside the door. Why are your people dissatisfied? Have you any complaints about the food?'

For Grame, the question completed her resemblance to a machine. 'We have no complaints about anything,' he said quickly. He was afraid if he let himself take her seriously, he might smash her, like the machine.

'That was not an honest answer,' Valya said reprovingly.

'It was not an honest question,' Grame said.

She gave him a quick, surprised look. 'You're right,' she said. 'I can see you have an independent mind that will be useful to us.' She turned away to speak to the zoologist.

'His parents were mech-reps,' a team-member called Berrn whispered. 'Ability is usually inherited.'

'I got mine by mutation,' Grame said. 'Some people lose theirs that way too. Mutations aren't always for the best.' He looked closely at Berrn.

'You're interested in my face?' Berrn asked.

'I'm memorising it,' Grame told him.

Valya turned back. 'The first reason we are going to

Britain is to stir the enthusiasm of our people, by the nature and scope of our scientific discoveries. We want to discover possible sources of fuel, or of other mineral wealth. We want to investigate the animal life and the vegetation. We want to study the habits of any people who may exist in Britain; decide for ourselves if these people ever were civilised; and examine archaeological remains, if any. We are the first people in the civilised world who have been given the opportunity of studying the remains of British civilisation.' She stopped to look at her watch, then spoke more quickly.

'You will note that I don't say we are the first of our race to land in Britain. The first, so far as we know, was a man called Garrett, who vanished from this country about eighty years ago. Sixty years ago a man who claimed he was Garrett came back. He brought with him what looked like some very unreliable maps. Unreliable or not, they are all we have to go on. In the south, there are hills and precipices. In the south-east, there is a river estuary, on which he claimed to have found harbour in his home-made boat. As you know, the possession of a boat has been for many generations a punishable crime.'

'Why?' Grame asked.

'In the time of our distant ancestors there were boats. But at the historical period of the upheaval no boat that left our coast returned with its crew alive, although one or two drifted back with dead men on board. We are not a sea-going people by nature: our ancestors feared some disastrous infection, and reinforced nature by law. With the development of the long-distance flying machine we are at last able to leave our own continent. We are the first team to take off for Britain, which until now has been strictly off the route. Any questions?' She looked at her audience menacingly. No one spoke.

'This man Garrett,' she went on smoothly, 'before he

died an exemplary death, gave us the information that the country was heavily wooded. We have decided to fly in an Amphibian, to land, if possible, on a field or clearing within fifty miles of the coast, or, if no other suitable place can be found, on the estuary of the river.'

She stopped and looked at her notes in a quite unhurried manner. 'I will read to you the other things Garrett said. "There is a city like no other." The examiner asked him what it was built of. "It might be gold," Garrett said. "There's wealth, and there's savage Gods, and there's dogs. No hair." He died then. That was all.'

She closed her notebook. 'You will observe,' she said, 'that he didn't say the city was made of gold. He said it might be gold. The savage gods I can believe in. The no hair I can't explain. The dogs are probably pets. Any questions?'

'Why didn't they let him live longer and talk more?' Grame asked.

'No one was interested in Britain at the time,' Valya said. It didn't seem to Grame much of an explanation. He let his mind wander on to the subject of Garrett while Valya went on talking about the nobility of their enterprise, and what the State expected of them. Garrett had spent twenty years in that wild country, and as a reward had been killed off on his return to his native land. Perhaps in his day it hadn't been necessary to stimulate the enthusiasm of the people by accounts of wild enterprise and bold exploration.

'The scientists' team will be led by myself,' Valya was saying. 'The four anthropologists will form a leaderless group, ultimately responsible also to myself. A member of the artists' panel is with us to render vividly the story of British savagery. An exhibition of his pictures will be given on our return. A Noble Abstractionist, who will not accompany us, will address us briefly before we leave so that we

may keep our thoughts on the improbabilities of outer space and the importance of the vital particle. You will treat him with respect and close your eyes when he links Abstractions with morals. Before he begins I wish to say that I expect a high standard of moral behaviour from all of you. We go with peaceful intentions, but a limited number of guns will be carried.'

While the Noble Abstractionist was speaking to them, Grame examined his companions. He had been taken round for the naming, so he already knew who they were and why they had been chosen. The only one he liked on sight was a little man called Hcp, a man of about forty, with a big nose and a heavy brow. Hcp was, or was at least called, a zoologist. The botanist was a thin, stooping man with spectacles; and the geologist, Roono, was a thin, stooping man without spectacles. The artist was paunchy and self-important. There were three members of the leaderless group of anthropologists, as well as Grame himself. Berrn had a supercilious expression; Kitson giggled and was too friendly with everyone; Thorp had a strong face, a thwarted expression, and a powerful body. There were nine people, counting Valya, and it might be supposed the Amphibian would have a pilot, which would make ten.

The Noble Abstractionist had reached the question of morals, and Grame obediently closed his eyes. He didn't need to listen. Since childhood he had been told how to preserve the vital particle; on this early morning he was too excited to listen to further instruction. He accepted the touch on the forehead and trooped out with the others on to the barren airfield.

The monstrous Amphibian was already hissing. Grame listened with a trained ear to the noise, and passed it as satisfactory.

Only the Science Controller had come to see them off.

He shook hands and exchanged kindly platitudes with them all, then scurried back across the airfield with his coat lifting in the wind.

Grame had never flown before. It was with reverence for the magnificent power of man that he watched the ground fall away beneath him, until the airport was smaller than his finger nail, and Mount Kenya was a white-topped ant heap.

The others were already reading, or, in an even more sophisticated manner, preparing to sleep. Grame, who could have stared from the window for hours, closed his eyes. He was anxious that no one should discover his ignorance of air travel, which was complete; or his knowledge of flying-machines, which was comprehensive; he had worked his way from one end of the flying-machine factory to the other.

The accumulated exhaustion of the last two days rushed over his defences, and soon he collapsed into a sleep that lasted until the night came. He woke to see the stars floating overhead. When he peered down there was nothing beneath him but empty blackness. He had no idea if they were flying over land or ocean or deserted space.

He had a throbbing desire for company. He moved up beside the pilot and watched the needle as it charted the course.

'I never trust that job,' the pilot grunted.

'You can,' Grame said. 'We check it three times.'

'What do you know about it?'

'I was one of the roving hands in the factory.'

'Do you mean if something goes wrong I've got someone with me who can help to put it right?'

'I know the engine.'

'Thank the Abstraction for that. I thought I'd no one with me but a bunch of loony scientists who'd sit staring at beetles while I tried to fix the port engine back on with

glue. Make no mistake, you, what's your name, Grame, this expedition will get tangled up in the forest somewhere and stay away for months. How can I guarantee everything will run smoothly if the Amphibian's been left to rot in a jungle for a year? They're all interested in landing in Britain. I'm interested in getting away again. And what happens if this gadget goes wrong?' he asked, pointing again to the needle moving across the chart. 'Could any of that lot navigate?'

'I could try,' Grame said.

He spent two hours checking the needle with the navigation instruments, happy in his technical intimacy with the pilot, before he went back to his seat. He meant to sleep again, but he stayed awake for the rest of the night, watching the faces of the others as they slept. He stared for a long time at Valya's stern young profile. When she woke she smiled at him and beckoned him to her side. She told him how much she admired the strength that had brought him from the mech-raps' hut on to this expedition—an expedition, she said, that would bring glorious opportunities to them all.

'It's important to the country,' she said. 'But to us it's life or death. It will make or break each one of us. And for me, Grame, it's the test of all my life and all my training.'

She looked at him with such intensity of emotion that for a startling second of illumination, he felt he understood her. She was no longer a machine, but a friend he had met in the high strangeness of space.

Not long after daybreak they saw a black line on the blue sea, and the pilot told them it was Britain.

Chapter Four

‘THEY SAY it’s only fifty generations from virgin forest to virgin forest,’ Hep said gloomily. ‘Look at it. No one lives here unless they live in trees.’

The Amphibian had drifted in over the green waves of the forest, seeing neither town nor village nor house. Although it could come down on its toes as smoothly as a ballet dancer, there had been no clearing big enough to land on. Valya had in the end ordered it out to sea again, and they had come cutting in over the sluggish water to a wide swampy bay; edged their way up past the soup of rotting twigs and leaves and sodden tree trunks, until what had seemed a bay turned into a slow, oozing river—the river of Garrett’s map. There the plane dropped gently on to one of the clearer patches of the water.

‘Safe anchorage!’ the pilot announced. He was sweating. ‘What you’re going to learn here except that leaves grow on trees, I don’t know. Listen to the birds.’

They were all quiet, listening uneasily to the sustained sopranos, gossiping flutes, twanging tenors, thin pipes, and angry brass of the birds. It was like a three-ring opera, and the confusion of melodies confirmed the uneasiness in their hearts.

‘All ashore,’ Valya commanded briskly. At first no one moved. Not one of them had ever before left the continent of Africa.

‘Savages,’ the botanist suggested in a dim voice.

‘Earthquakes,’ said the geologist.

'Snakes and the rotting death,' another voice muttered. 'Anyone would think we had landed on the moon,' Valya said angrily.

'It's worse than the moon,' Hep pointed out. 'We haven't heard anything against the moon. Think what we've heard of Britain!'

'I don't mind landing,' Thorp said slowly. 'But I'd like to know our plans for getting back. Suppose something happened to the Amphibian?'

'The pilot will look after the Amphibian.'

'I certainly will,' the pilot said. 'I'm not going exploring.'

'Come on ashore,' Valya said contemptuously. 'Who is going to be first, I asked?' She spoke like a schoolmistress.

'What about Grame?' the geologist suggested. 'Yes, what about Grame?' Berrn repeated.

'Very well,' Grame said. He was modestly surprised that the honour had gone to him.

He opened the side-door of the Amphibian and jumped out on to the mush of floating timber. It sank beneath him, but he wallowed, waist-deep, to the bank. He stepped out on to the swampy land of Britain—the first brown man to put a foot on the shore since the days of Garrett.

He blinked in distaste at the giant frog that bounded out of the water beside him. It was a good two feet in girth and it leapt as high as his head.

'A nice specimen to flatten out in my album,' Hep said grimly. He had landed just behind Grame. Between them they levered a tree-trunk towards the Amphibian, so that the others could walk ashore. Grame watched them as they came, his heart full of an almost reverent comradeship. Now, as they advanced upon this undisturbed land, he felt that everything was true—they were on the greatest expedition of their time, and all of them were vaguely ennobled by the tasks before them. Valya, who came last, was, by reason of her sex, the noblest of them all.

‘Four of us will look for a good camping site on higher ground,’ she said briskly. ‘Roono, Berrn, Kitson, come with me. The rest of you get the supplies out of the Amphibian.’ She buckled on her gun as she spoke. ‘Grame, Hep, Thorp—when you’ve helped to get the other material on the bank, collect the tent, follow us, and put it up. We must get organised well before dark.’

When the other equipment had been brought out, Grame was left alone in the Amphibian with Hep and Thorp.

‘Hey, you, Grame, what do you think of Valya?’ Hep asked.

‘Valya,’ Grame repeated, letting the name run round his head, while his heart responded with a valvular leap. ‘Valya? I’ve never thought of her.’

‘I’ve thought of her a lot,’ Hep said. ‘Bride of the State. That’s the State’s idea. They probably thought it up by machine. We’re going to war by machine,’ he added casually. ‘With the yellow men of America. They’ve fed the machine on fluted equations and population statistics; available and potential munitions on both sides; and any other rags of facts they can scrape up. When the machine has worked out the answer, which is naturally the inevitability of victory, then we’ll declare by wireless machine that we’re at war. But will the machine fight? Not it. Any more than it will give Valya a child.’

‘Don’t listen to him,’ Thorp advised Grame. ‘He’s paying the penalty of life as a University lecturer. There’s never anything to do in Universities but debate and conspire and destroy the enthusiasms of young men. He’s giving you a dose of all three at once. Now I would like Valya very considerably if she didn’t always behave like a submarine commander in an emergency, even when there isn’t an emergency.’

‘She’s a Bride of the State,’ Hep said, ‘and that explains

everything, except that she's beautiful sometimes. The State doesn't appreciate it. Now, what usually happens to a beautiful woman whose husband doesn't appreciate her beauty?'

'She meets someone like you,' Thorp suggested. 'Do you want a submarine commander? Or would you be happier with someone terrestrial?'

Grame listened in bewilderment. He still wasn't used to discussion for its own sake. He didn't know whether it was Valya or the State that they were attacking, and he was afraid that they might be testing him in some way. Conspiracy was one of his weak subjects.

'The State did pretty well to send us on this trip,' he ventured.

'That's the tent there, in green canvas,' Thorp said. 'Get a move on, Valya doesn't like to be kept waiting. Do you know why they sent us here, whatever Valya says. Anthropology's just a blind. We're meant to comb the island for raw material that might be some good in the coming war.'

'But we haven't got the equipment.'

'We haven't any equipment worth mentioning. The expedition's been thrown together like a cheap toy,' Thorp said. 'Everybody's Number One Exploring Set. All imagination and cardboard.'

'Our first job,' Hep said, 'is to capture some natives and find out what they know. We'll probably torture them,' he added cheerfully. 'There are natives somewhere. Remember Garrett and his pet dogs.'

They went ashore with the tent. The others had already moved inland to drier ground. Berrn was waiting to show them the way. They followed him for about half a mile up the hill. The other men were checking supplies, stopping occasionally to look overhead at the birds that swooped and fought amongst the upper branches.

'Set it up here where the two trees have fallen,' Valya said. 'There's probably just room enough. It was the nearest thing to a clear space we could find.'

They were spreading the tent on the ground when a howl like the blast of a thousand factory sirens came from the interior of the jungle.

'Men?' Thorp asked.

Valya didn't see that the question was meant to be funny. 'It's not a noise men could make,' she said shortly.

'Whatever it is, I'd like it not to come this way,' Hep said. 'I don't want to be sent back from this island as a jar of ashes.'

'You'll be lucky if you get back at all,' Thorp said. The howling was growing louder. 'They sound as if they're going to tear you up until they find your vital particle.'

'Should we get back to the Amphibian?' the paunchy artist asked nervously.

Everyone looked at Valya. She was brave enough, but for once she was irresolute. 'What do you think about it, Grame?' she asked surprisingly.

'It's only howling,' he said. 'Some wild beast, I suppose.'

'Our mech-rep isn't worried,' the botanist said heavily. 'That's something, but not enough. Let's get back to the Amphibian.'

'Why should I be worried by a noise?' Grame asked angrily. 'I used to work in the danger factory. I turned the wheel and ran. Everyone who got out alive was given extra money and time off. That's why I'm here. I got the money for books, and I'd plenty of time left to study them.'

'I wouldn't say you had that now,' Hep observed calmly. 'The howling's getting nearer.' He looked at Valya.

'We won't go back,' she said firmly. She was breathing fast, like someone in a race, and she looked about two

inches taller. 'We knew there might be some danger on this trip. If anyone's afraid, let him go back.' No one moved, and she looked at them in triumph, not thinking at all about the howls that came from the forest. The important thing in her mind was that she had to establish ascendancy over the men. 'There wasn't anything about wild beasts in my instructions.'

'We must believe either your instructions or the howling,' Hep said. 'I'm inclined to believe the howling.'

Their interest in conversation had been destroyed. No one listened to him. No one listened now to anything but the baying, howling, shrieking, yelling, that rushed at them through the trees. They moved back automatically into a tighter group. The first of the animals came charging through the trees, and the next dozen, and the next hundred. Valya and the men who had guns fired, but it was as ineffectual as firing into the wind.

The brutes came on, some spotted white, some smooth and tan, some with long hair that swept the ground; some of them as big as leopards and others not much more than the size of a squirrel. It was this disparity that made the pack seem so terrifying. It was like being assaulted by a mixed gang of lions and wolves and rats. It was as though all the beasts had united against man; but the creatures were essentially dogs.

The pack, still howling, swept down on them. The paunchy artist dragged out his gun and fired; then ran, looking backwards over his shoulder.

'Stand!' Valya shouted. She had fired every shot in her gun, and was running wildly around, looking for an ammunition belt. The artist tripped over a branch and fell, and the first of the dogs was on him at once. Kitson jumped at them, screaming, and tried to pull them off with his hands. He was dragged down to join the struggling heap, and vanished beneath a dog his own size. The pilot,

running to help, was knocked over by half a dozen pygmy dogs. Everyone who had a gun was firing, but in this battle there was no time to reload. Thorp made a wild effort to save the pilot, then, as a gigantic long-haired brute swerved to attack him, he gave up and ran off through the trees, zigzagging wildly, with the dog still after him. The botanist, trying to follow him, was brought down.

Grame had no gun, but he picked up the branch of a tree and flailed it at the leading dogs. He saw the geologist fall. When he reached him the dogs were already tearing at his flesh. He kicked the first dog in the muzzle and one of the others left the body and sprang for his neck. He was borne backwards, fighting, but he swerved free and rushed forwards into the smaller dogs, kicking to kill and beating them over the heads with the branch. In a few lethal minutes he had fought his way through. The body of the pack swept past him, but one yellow dog turned after him and leapt on his back. He swung round as he fell, and as its teeth closed on his shoulder he got his hands round its throat and strangled it to death with his own blood in its mouth. He wrenched its dead jaws from his shoulder, and looked back. More dogs were coming. He began to run, then turned and threw the dead dog back towards the others. They were checked, and he reeled on into the woods until he was too feeble to run. He crawled weakly to a tree, and hoisted himself up to its lower branches. He heard two more shots, then dogs streamed towards his tree and circled it, howling. The bigger dogs tried to reach his feet: swearing, he pulled himself higher.

Where the arteries reached the gap in his torn shoulder the blood still spurted. He took out his medical sponge, tore the dressing off, and plugged the wound. The coca dressing numbed the nerves, and as the pain wore off his mind again became the master of his body, instead of being a subordinate of his glands.

He told himself that dogs didn't climb trees in Africa, whatever they did in Britain. He was at a safe height, provided that no outsize cats were sitting on the top branches waiting to drop on him and tear off his skin. The night was far away, but he had no wish to spend it in the tree.

He remembered the others, with a little detached sorrow: and then Valya, with an alarmed tenderness. If she had been any sort of leader she would have seen that everyone had a gun. No one had taken the howling seriously enough until it was too late. He wondered if she was alive. If she wasn't, she had probably been pulled to pieces already and eaten by the dogs, he thought, and was horrified that he could envisage such an end for her as coolly as though she had flickered unimportantly in the murl of a dream.

Clearer and closer than any dream was the memory that he had advised them against going back to the Amphibian. There wouldn't have been time to reach it, he told himself, and fell into a guilty lust for action. Soon he was raging at the dogs, cursing them and shouting blasphemies at them. At the bottom of the tree, they howled his curses back.

He became calmer, and with malicious patience set to breaking off the driest twigs and tearing them to fragments. He laid them on the crotch of the tree beside him, and broke off a few small dying branches. Then he opened his fire-box and let the instantaneous flame play on the little bundle of shredded twigs, hoping to raise enough fire to light the bigger branches.

The twigs caught instantly, and a few little ropes of flame lashed up. The tree, nearly sapless with age, picked up the flame and sent it spinning through the leaves. Fire shot up through it like a coloured fountain. The danger signals clanged in Grame's mind again and he leapt for the ground. The dogs were scattering, and now they turned

and ran from the tree, which had already doubled its height in flames.

Grame caught up another dead branch, rammed it into the burning tree, and stepped back. The flames from the tree were dying down nearly as quickly as they had risen. The dead wood had been burnt out, and the fire that had a moment ago looked as though it might spread through the forest now could scarcely light the end of a dead branch. Finally the branch began to smoulder. Grame took it and held it before him as he walked, but the dogs did not return.

He walked for an hour without coming near either the camp or the river.

Dazed, in pain, with the excitement of action wearing off and leaving him flat and sick as though he'd just come out of a drinking spell, he wasn't for some time capable of reasoning that as he'd come from a river he must move down into the valley to find it again. When he realised that he'd been walking uphill and that every painful step had doubled his distance from the river, his resentment against the other members of the party seethed up. They hadn't given him a gun. He wouldn't be here, so far from the river, if they had given him a gun. He became sullenly determined to have a gun. He dismissed the ugly thought of Valya's torn body, and at last began to make his way in the right direction.

There was still no sign of the dogs. He supposed wearily that if he met another he would be knocked down and ripped to death. He felt he had no longer the strength to escape, but as he walked forward he kept his eyes on the trees, choosing those that would be easiest for a tired man to climb.

When finally he reached the spot where they had begun to set up their camp, he saw nothing but desolation. The body of the pilot lay on the ground with his throat torn

out; of the others there was no sign, only scattered shreds of blood-stained clothing. If they had died, the dogs had dragged them away.

He hesitated over the body of the pilot. He had no experience of funeral rites, but he had been educated to believe in the Noble Abstraction, and he knew that if the vital particle was to escape and join the Noble Abstraction, the body must be burnt. He wondered in confusion where the vital particle was to be found—in the head or in the stomach or in the heart. He was so tired that he thought of leaving the body alone, but he had liked the pilot for treating him like a man when he was a mech-rep. Wouldn't the vital particle escape by itself as the body mouldered into dust? The dogs would allow no peaceful disintegration. He could have buried the body in the earth, safe from all surface creatures; but he shrank from this unnatural practice.

In the end he began methodically to make a pile of dry leaves, twigs, and dead branches. Each time he bent down to gather fuel he thought he would fall and never stand again. While he worked he saw the head and shoulders of a black dog come through the trees like a swollen full stop. He lit the fire hastily, and fed it with bigger and bigger branches, and the full stop fell back into the obliterating darkness of the forest.

He swayed towards the body of the pilot and dragged it to the blazing pile. While the flames scorched his face and hands, he pushed the body into the ravenous heart of the fire, and backed away, trying to formulate his religious feelings.

He was sure that the man was dead, and that the Noble Abstraction existed, but suddenly he doubted whether the Abstraction would be strengthened by the vital particle of dust. And was it vital? He thought of vitality, trying to separate it from his own body and compress it, seeing it as

a cloud, a steel spring; a bullet; a pill; a phosphorescent crumb; a molecule; nothing; nothing; nothing. And no one left to release this nothing when he died.

He looked hesitantly at the fire, and dragged a few more branches to it. After all, it would have been easier to drop the body in the river—but that wouldn't have kept the dogs away. It was the first time, he thought, grinning weakly, that he had derived any practical benefit from religious observances.

The grin and the thought behind it faded away, and he sank deeper and deeper into a pitch-lake of depression. He had killed several men, but he had never before been called upon to dispose of a corpse, and he resented the obligation to consider death and its associated facts in detail.

While the fire burned, he realised sombrely, he was safe. He built it up again with the biggest branches he could find. Whatever was being consumed in the fire, he would sleep beside it.

He was wakened an hour later by the discomfort of his dreams. His ears wakened to a world that roared and spat; his nose to a pricking alarm; his eyes to a vision of trees that shimmered and glassily twisted. Then he saw the mountainous flame whose heat had distorted the air.

He jumped up. He felt as though nails were being hammered through his shoulder, but his mind leapt past the triviality of pain, into the immense necessity of survival. The wind had scattered his fire, and the dry trees had welcomed the sparks. Nine or ten of them were already in full blaze, and though they would have repelled a dozen gales they were defenceless against the least of the whipping flame..

The wind was blowing in little veering gusts, and while it was the trees to the south that had picked up the first flames, the fire was burning briskly now in all directions.

Grame staggered towards the river, lurching into trees and bushes as he went. He fell once on his face in the mud, and clawed his way up with panic lifting the pores on his skin.

When he reached the river he waded through the rotting wood by the edge, and then swam painfully, pushing his way through the sluggish silt, and stopping to rest on a tree-trunk more than once, although the river was less than quarter of a mile across.

A hundred yards from the far side he didn't think he could swim any more. Nearly fainting, he pulled himself on a log and let himself be carried by the slow drift down the river until at last the log grounded in the mud. Then he waded ashore and staggered into the forest.

Chapter Five

SOME TIME in the middle of the night the blackness filtered away: he found he was lying on his back, looking up through leaves to the stars. He lay still, staring at the unfamiliar pattern. No explanation came to his mind. His shoulder ached, and he knew that he couldn't move. The shadow of a head came between his eyes and the stars, and he waited, knowing that he was helpless, and calling up all his resolution to die without being afraid. The head moved away. He tried to think of the Noble Abstraction. Looking up at the strange sky he felt that between the stars a force surged outwards farther than fancy, and downwards, engulfing the earth and washing it round the sun. He was homeless, exiled in the universe, but the time had perhaps come when his vital dust would swell and strengthen the Abstraction. He dropped through space again into black unconsciousness.

When he woke in the morning two brown faces were bending over him.

'Valya, Hep,' he muttered.

They raised him and put water to his lips. They took the dressing from his aching shoulder and put in a fresh one.

Valya bathed his face. 'We thought you'd gone,' she said.

'Where are the others?' he asked.

'There aren't any others,' Hep said briefly. 'Except Berrn, and he's lying beside you.'

'I burnt the pilot,' Grame muttered.

'You burnt about five square miles of Britain at the same time,' Hep said. 'As well as most of our supplies. Valya and I had brought a few over before you started your religious rites. We got to the Amphibian,' he explained, 'and when we thought the dogs had gone we went ashore and rescued what we could. We roped some logs together and ferried the stuff across to this side. The logs rolled over and we lost a few things—rather a lot of things, in fact. Still, why should we worry? We have a gun, five bullets, and about six sticks of dynamite, which is six thousand too few for me to express what I feel about this country.'

Valya held some meat out to Grame and he took it and ate hungrily. 'It might have been better to get everything back on the Amphibian,' she said. 'But we didn't.'

'It seemed a bit near the dog side of the river,' Hep said. 'We were going back for the rest of the stuff, when we were amazed to see that Britain had gone on fire. We didn't connect it with you immediately. I'm glad it was your work. It would have been worse if it had been the local inhabitants preparing a welcome for us.'

Grame didn't hear the end of the sentence. Hep's voice was blowing away, as though he were shouting from a moving train. Grame went back again to the blackness.

When he opened his eyes again the fire from his shoulder had spread all over his body. Hep was still talking; Grame didn't know if he'd been talking all the time.

'Can you hear me, Grame?' Hep said. 'We've been waiting to ask you. Is it true you used to be in a flying-machine factory? Do you know how the Amphibian works?'

'The pilot,' Grame mumbled. 'I burnt his body.'

'What do you know about the Amphibian?'

'More than I'm supposed to know,' Grame said weakly.

They were worrying him, and he tried to move his arm to wave them away. The pain wrenched the sweat out all over his body. He felt his weakness as an enemy. 'I might be able to fly it,' he said in a clear whisper. He forced himself to sit up, and the pain ripped into him again. He fell back.

'Take it easy!' Hep said savagely. 'We have a lifetime here.'

Valya moved forward. 'I'll look at that shoulder again,' she said flatly. She opened one of the packs and found a medical sponge. She changed the dressing on his wound, showing about the same degree of sympathy as a veterinary surgeon giving a pill to a horse.

Grame felt the pain ease off, and he tried again to beat down his feebleness. He forced his body to stand up.

He leant against a tree, gasping, and looked down at Berrn's wounded face.

'His leg's the trouble,' Valya said curtly. 'He can't walk.'

Berrn's eyes were open. 'I'll walk,' he said.

'We could build a shelter,' Hep suggested. 'There's certainly wood enough. It might kill him to walk to the river again. We dragged him down yesterday, and floated him across. It won't be so easy to float him back upstream.'

Grame slid down to the ground again. 'Is there food?' he asked.

They opened a tin and gave him more meat and he ate slowly.

It was raining hard enough for the drops to slide down through the dark ceiling of leaves, and it rained steadily while Valya and Hep dragged branches together and piled them high enough to make a shelter where they could lie or sit with their heads bent. Soon the trees became heavy with rain, and every few minutes they trembled in the breeze and cascaded water on to the floor of the forest.

‘Next time you have an expedition to study the primitive peoples,’ Hep said, ‘leave me out. And who forgot the machine-guns? I’d like to get at those dogs with the proper equipment.’ He squatted down beside Grame and helped himself to some meat from the tin.

They sat then in silence. A little creature the size of a man’s finger dropped from the tree above. Hep reached forward and scooped it up in his hand. It scratched and spat. To all of them, it looked very like a cat. Hep put it on the ground experimentally. It began to run off, and a bird swooped neatly and picked it up in its beak.

Berrn was shivering violently. They tried to feed him, but he turned away his head.

‘We’ll light a fire,’ Valya decided. ‘If we watch it by turns, it won’t spread.’ It was the first time for an hour she had spoken.

She and Hep moved about in the rain, gathering wood. They lit the fire by the mouth of the shelter, and it burned sullenly, sizzling and hissing in the rain.

‘You’re thinking, Valya?’ Hep asked her.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m thinking. We’ll wait here till Grame’s stronger.’

Berrn heard her. ‘I can walk,’ he cried in terror. ‘I can walk.’

There was a noise of movement in the woods. Valya’s hand went to her gun-belt. Hep turned, with his teeth bared. The creature that appeared was not a dog. It was about eighteen inches high. It trotted unconcernedly through the trees and out of sight.

‘Do you know what that was?’ Hep said in awe. ‘It was a horse. A mutation, by the entire Abstraction. A mutation horse—you’ll witness it, you two? And how could I get one back home?’

‘Ride it,’ Grame muttered viciously.

In the next few days they saw many more little horses.

They ran sometimes in pairs, sometimes singly: occasionally a colt with long folding legs sprawled and pranced beside its mother. Hep, cursing the loss of his camera, made laborious drawings. Otherwise he sat still with his chin on his hands, staring at the illimitable prospect of trees. It was Valya who gathered the food for the fire and attended to the two sick men. Gramc grew steadily stronger.

They spoke very little. Every hour or two someone assured Berrn that he would soon be better. Berrn slept spasmodically, and always woke crying in an hysterical voice that he could walk.

'If he can't walk,' Gramc said on the third day of monotony, 'I'll soon be strong enough to carry him.'

'If we had some tools,' Hep said, 'we could get busy and invent the wheel. Then we could domesticate the horses. It's only the work of a few generations. Anyway, I swear I'm going to catch one of the horses.'

'I swear if you do I'll eat it,' Gramc warned.

'We couldn't eat a mutation,' Valya said seriously, and Gramc and Hep laughed uproariously.

'There would be nothing wrong with a change of food,' Hep said, when he had finished laughing. 'Do you think we could shoot some of the birds?'

They listened again to the background noise of all their fears. The birds were chattering, cooing, and carolling; some of them clanged and some squeaked like rusty gates. They sounded like choirboys mixed with bagpipes and hecklers.

'Do you know why birds are so light?' Gramc asked. 'It's because their bones are hollow.' He liked passing on pieces of scientific information to others.

'I'd like to make their hearts hollow too,' Hep said. 'Why can't we shoot them? They may taste better than they sound.'

‘I’ve only a few shots,’ Valya said. ‘We can’t waste them on birds. Couldn’t we make some bows and arrows?’

They tried, self-consciously. It proved to be difficult to shoot birds with bows and arrows. While they tried, it was borne in on them that not all the flying creatures were birds. There was one shaped like a bat, but with the florid brilliance of a butterfly’s wings. Watching and listening, they found that it whistled shrilly as it flew. Another, a shovel-headed creature, had scales on its back like a lizard. It flew clumsily from branch to branch, and grunted.

‘Nightmare spinney,’ Hep said. He threw down his useless bow. ‘Back to the tinned meat,’ he said.

‘I can walk,’ Berrn said. It was the only remark he ever made.

‘All right,’ Hep said unpleasantly. ‘You can walk. Then get up and do it. If I have to listen to these birds any longer I’m going to lose my reason.’

Berrn was frightened. He pulled himself up, and managed to stumble forward a couple of paces.

‘We can leave to-morrow,’ Valya said.

That night two things happened. First, Hep woke, with what sounded like his ultimate groan. A bird, not half the size of his fist, was at his throat. He ripped it off, and clutched his neck to hold back the blood. ‘A vampire starling,’ Grame said. ‘You’re the one who’s interested in mutations.’ He attended to the wound. He would have thought Hep was frightened if he hadn’t already known him so well.

Hep and Grame were still awake when Thorp staggered into camp.

‘Your fire,’ he muttered. ‘I saw your fire.’ He sat down beside the fire. Valya stirred and looked up drowsily.

‘Thorp,’ she said dreamily. ‘Thorp died.’

She woke completely. 'It really is Thorp,' she said. 'It is, isn't it. Thorp, are you ill?'

He didn't answer.

'Are you thirsty, Thorp?' she asked.

She poured him a drink. She put the cup in his hand, and he let it fall to the ground.

'Again,' she said. She poured more of the strong liquor in the cup and held it to his mouth, but his jaws were rigid.

'Food,' said Hep, holding forward some of the tinned meat. Thorp didn't move. The others watched him while the firelight exposed his blood-stained bony face and filthy clothing. Abruptly, he fell over and slept.

They lifted him into the shelter and covered him as well as they could. His skin was hot. Grame slipped a hand inside his clothing.

'He's very hard,' he said uneasily to Hep.

Hep looked down at Thorp in despair. 'We can't go to-morrow, now,' he said, 'unless—anyway, he's the last one. We saw all the others die.'

In the early morning, when the first layer of darkness was floating away, Grame woke to the sound of Thorp's voice.

'They died within an hour,' he was saying. 'The woman first. A woman dying. A dying woman with a dying child.'

'What woman?' Grame asked, but Thorp didn't hear. Grame shook Hep out of his sleep, and they tried again to make Thorp drink, but he shut his lips against the cup, and they put him down.

'The woman,' he explained in a rational voice. 'She had a child, a little girl, and they died. The woman, the dying woman . . .'

He babbled on about the woman until Berrn started up crying: 'I can walk.'

Valya woke. 'Oh, what is it?' she said.

'He's raving, that's what it is,' Hep told her. 'A dying woman and child. You'll get the thread of it soon.'

'The woman,' Thorp said, 'the child. They died a hot death with blood in their mouths.'

'I'll get some more wood for the fire,' Hep said, standing up. 'Do you know,' he added in a strange voice, 'it's only eight days since I was complaining of the monotony of life at the University.'

'They talk,' Thorp shouted. 'The woman and the child talk. The dying woman—they only took an hour to die.'

Grame took the canvas bucket and went off to fetch water from the stream. He took off his shirt and let the rain sluice down over his naked shoulders until his skin absorbed some truth about earth and water and sky, and sent tremors of delight to his mind. He stretched himself. There was only a little residual pain left in his wound, and his arm was not much more than stiff. He dressed himself again, slowly, listening to the birds, glad for once that there was no other sound to hear.

When he came back there was nothing much to do but sit and listen to Thorp. Sometimes they asked him questions, but if he heard them he didn't understand. He was quiet for more than an hour. They thought he was sleeping, but then he spoke again.

'They were going to the city,' he said, 'but they died instead.'

'I think he's mad,' Grame said, throwing more wood on the fire. 'Give him some medicine.'

'Cure madness with medicine?' Valya asked.

'He has a fever and he's dying. Give him the drops.'

'Grame, he's had them,' Valya said. 'They make no difference. I don't know what his fever is, but the drops don't help.'

'Why should they?' Hep asked. 'The dogs are savage

beasts. The little birds suck our blood. The flies are half the size of birds. The bats have changed into butterflies or the butterflies into bats, just as you please. The cats are no bigger than mice, and birds eat them. The mice have probably changed into lions. Why should you expect the bacteria to be tame and die at the touch of our drops? They probably eat steel.'

'The city!' Thorp cried, struggling to get up. 'On to the golden city! But these two died.'

By the middle of the morning his voice was only a faint whisper, and they had long since given up listening to him. They sat in their various degrees of melancholy, staring at the rain; aware of the noises of the birds; too listless to comment any more on the wiry little horses.

Grame, turning to wipe the sweat from Thorp's brow, was surprised to see the sick man staring at him in recognition.

'It's Grame, isn't it?' Thorp whispered. 'Sorry—no sleep—dogs—running—no food.' His voice faded away. This time Grame managed to make him drink a little 'A dying woman,' Thorp whispered. 'She had a little girl. I found them in the forest. They talk—something—like our language.' His voice was now very little more than a fluttering breath. Grame bent over him to listen, but Thorp sagged into sleep.

'He's better, perhaps,' Grame said doubtfully.

Hep knelt over Thorp and touched the muscles on his thigh. 'Hard,' he said, and slumped back into thought.

Thorp slept for an hour then started up awake. 'Grame? Where's Grame?' he asked.

Grame bent over him, but Thorp didn't see him.

'Grame! Grame!' he shouted. 'They talk. The woman told me before she died. The city, the golden city. You must go to the west to find it. Oh, Verna, Verna!'

‘That’s his wife,’ Valya said. ‘I met her.’

‘Verna. The city, the golden city!’ Thorp muttered, and they looked in despair at each other.

For the rest of the day Thorp woke and slept, and slept and woke, raving gently about the woman and the city and his wife.

At the end of the desolate day he had another flash of reason and called again for Grame.

‘Grame!’ he said clearly. ‘It’s about ten days’ march to the west, to the winter-setting sun, she said. A city of gold, she said.’ He licked his lips with his tongue, and Grame saw blood in his mouth.

Grame put water in the cup, and raised Thorp up so that he could drink. Thorp knocked the cup away, and, holding on to Grame, pulled himself up and out of the shelter. He lurched forward for two or three clockwork steps, and then fell on his face.

Grame and Hep went to move him back into the shelter, but when they touched him he screamed and when they tried to lift him he vomited blood.

They put him down again on the wet ground and wiped the blood from his lips. They waited for him to die, sitting beside him in the rain, which soaked gently and steadily through their clothing, dripping from their hair down their necks and from their necks running in rivulets down their backs.

‘I wish that the rain would stop or that he would die,’ Hep said.

Thorp stirred again. ‘All the secrets are in the city,’ he muttered.

Valya felt his pulse. ‘We don’t want to stay here longer than we can help,’ she said, shuddering.

They watched his face. His lips still moved, but if any noise came from them it was lost in the sizzle of rain and the small explosions of the fire.

Grame put his hand on Thorp's forehead. He saw that the lips were still, but it was two or three minutes before he felt the hot forehead under his hand grow cooler.

He stood up and nodded to the others, and they all went back to the shelter out of the rain.

Chapter Six

‘SO THAT’S SETTLED,’ Hep said. ‘And here is the sordid dawn. Berrn is clearing his throat to tell us he can walk. So let’s walk back to the Amphibian and see what Grame can do.’

Valya turned and looked at him with passionate intensity. He didn’t like it; he turned away quickly and began to open another tin of meat.

‘It isn’t settled, Hep,’ she said. ‘Suppose Grame by some miracle discovers how to fly the Amphibian. Suppose by another miracle we cross the ocean and land safely. Then what do you expect?’

‘Another miracle,’ Hep said. ‘I’ll be used to them by then.’

‘I don’t think you’ll get your other miracle. Do you suppose we’ll be given an honourable reception, universal acclaim, medals and rewards from the Council? If we come back so soon, four survivors from ten, equipment lost, nothing proved, nothing even discovered, then we are disgraced for life. Each one of us will be publicly degraded. If you go back now, Hep, you go back to being a mech-rep, as Grame used to be. Or perhaps we’ll all go to exemplary death. Do you want to go back, Hep, or do you want to go on to the Golden City? If we discover that,’ she said, ‘we’ve achieved something that will never be forgotten as long as civilisation lasts.’

Grame listened to her with a surge of pure emotion that swept away the memory of the last few days. Even Hep

looked at her with a momentary pride before he relapsed into another mood.

‘I wouldn’t say we’ve discovered nothing. We’ve found out about those pet dogs,’ he said sourly. ‘You’ve put new heart into me,’ he added. ‘I appreciate that in order not to die there soon I have to die here sooner.’

‘What can we find out if we go on? Do you suppose we’d have a dog’s chance of reaching that city?’ Berrn said. ‘And I’m not so sure I can walk if I have to do it for ten days,’ he added in a whining voice.

‘I liked the bit about the dog’s chance,’ Hep said approvingly.

‘We can’t be sure there’s a city,’ Valya said. ‘But at least there are people. Thorp met two. They talked a language he could understand.’

‘Thorp was raving mad, Valya,’ Hep said angrily.

‘I don’t think he was, at least not all the time. I believed what he said. And there was Garrett’s story about the city—the city that might be gold.’

‘There was Garrett’s story about the pet dogs too,’ Hep pointed out.

‘He didn’t say pet dogs. He only said dogs.’

‘He didn’t say golden city either. He said it might be.’

Valya looked him over coolly, as though she was choosing a piece of fish.

‘I’ve been taught that the worst enemy of our country is not the revolutionary, but the cynic. No cynic is going to stop me. I’m going on. Berrn asks what there is to find. I say, everything. There are people. They speak a language we can understand. Think how easy that makes our work! And there are still four of us to do that work. There’s a city, and it’s only ten days away. Only ten days from the discovery of the century, Hep!’

‘The worst enemy of the people is the orator,’ Hep stated. ‘Have some breakfast.’

‘Valya’s right,’ Grame said. ‘We must go on.’

‘I know what that ten days’ march will turn out to be,’ Hep said. ‘It’s just another version of it’s only half a mile, you can’t miss it. In the end it will be twenty days, and in this jungle we can’t help missing it. And I hope we have a compass. I’d like to find my way back without having to cut my initials on every tree all the way there.’

‘Do you mean that you’ll come, Hep?’

‘I’m coming, but only as a representative of an oppressed minority. I don’t want to come. I don’t want to be skewered to a tree by a British savage or die the way Thorp did. I’m afraid of this place. In any emergency, count on me to run away first and fastest. And I’ll tell you another thing. I’d like Grame to have a look at the Amphibian first and work out if he can fly her. If he can, any hints he can give me would be appreciated. I may be the only one of us to get back alive.’

‘But it would take a week to explain the engine to you, and I’d have to dismantle it first,’ Grame protested.

‘No, don’t dismantle the engine,’ Hep said. ‘I’ll have to save you as well as me, then. But let’s have a look at the Amphibian, anyway. Because if you can’t fly it we might as well settle down as permanent inhabitants of that city, and not bother with the long walk back.’

When they had eaten, Grame and Hep set off together. They walked to the river and along the bank until they were opposite the black bulk of the Amphibian. Then they swam across the river.

Hep began to laugh as he climbed, dripping, up the side of the Amphibian.

‘No crocodiles,’ he explained. ‘Our luck’s in at last.’

They spent most of the day studying and checking the instrument panel. Grame explained the principles of flying to Hep. ‘Taking-off is more of a problem,’ he said. ‘And when it comes to landing . . .’

'It never will come to landing, from what you've told me about taking-off. And what about navigation?'

'I could probably hit Africa, although perhaps not any special part of it,' Grame said seriously. 'And then there's the automatic navigator, but the pilot didn't care for that much, I remember. Anyway,' he added, grinning, 'I'm a self-educated man. I began at the beginning, like the ancients, with the stars. All we have to do is keep going until I get back among the stars I know. Do you think we ought to take the sextant with us now? It's a risk, losing it, but it might be useful to know where we are when we're looking for that city.'

'Take it. I'm not counting too much on flying home. Grame, what do you think of Valya?'

'Oh, she's quite good looking,' Grame said cautiously.

'What do you think happens when a quite good-looking woman is left alone in a wilderness with two able-bodied men—and a chimpanzee like Berrn, if you want to count him?'

'The smaller, older, and uglier man sacrifices himself for his friend?' Grame suggested.

'You're coming on, Grame. Tell me, do you want Valya?' He watched Grame closely. 'I see, you think she's sacred.'

'You let her alone,' Grame said coldly.

'Take it easy. I was only sounding you to see if you'd join my society to protect Valya from me. It will save her the trouble of shooting me to protect the honour of the State. That woman's ruthless. She's an irresistible force, and I'm a removable object. And I've met tractors with a better sense of humour than hers. If I can't make a woman laugh, I haven't a chance.'

'It's time we got back,' Grame said.

The next morning they shared out the equipment that

was to be carried. Berrn accepted a small pack, raising his eyes to the tree-tops for sympathy. He marched a few steps, and began to limp.

'Perhaps you'd sooner wait here till we come back,' Valya said brutally, and Berrn cried at once: 'I can walk as well as any of you.'

They smothered the ashes of the fire with water from a near-by pool. There was never any shortage of water in the forest, even when it wasn't raining. This was a clear, blue morning, and the trees were humming with the celebrations of the perpetually celebrating birds. Some of them screamed with joy when the rain began, and others when it stopped. Some clattered with the excitement of the dawn; some shrieked with pleasure when the darkness came.

'What do they live on?' Valya wondered. 'Worms, grubs?'

'Each other,' Hep said. 'Look!'

They looked up as a giant green-feathered bird swooped down below the tree-tops. The smaller birds scattered like burnt paper in a gale, and the green bird swooped up with its victim hanging from its beak.

'And ants. You can smell them,' Hep said.

Through the cleaner odours of the forest the strong acid smell of the ants blew into their nostrils. In front of them, on the far side of a little stream, they saw a heap four times the height of a man.

'I'll have a look and see what bones they're picking clean,' Hep said. He walked forward incautiously, and leapt the stream.

The ants were each about two inches long. They were marching in formation, nine or ten abreast, as though they were learning to do something for a circus. When Hep approached they wheeled smartly and rushed at him like a mechanised unit. He watched in amazement, and he watched too long. As he turned to run they swarmed over

him, and before the first detachment had reached his face reinforcements were streaming up his legs. In five seconds he was entirely covered by ants. He was beating at them wildly when Grame rushed forward.

'Run,' he shouted to the others. He didn't stop to fight the ants already on Hep, but dragged him to the stream, threw him in, and rolled him over in the water. The pursuing ants stopped by the edge of the stream, and Grame held Hep under for a minute, then raised his head just enough to let him breathe. Drowned ants were already floating downstream, but it wasn't possible to drown the ants on his face without drowning Hep as well. Grame held the face up and tore the ants off, each of them still holding on to its lump of flesh.

When he thought it was safe, he lifted Hep out of the water and put him on the bank. His clothes were sodden, and when they had stripped him they found he was bleeding steadily from the hundreds of bites on his legs and neck.

They wiped over the holes with a medical sponge; lit a fire to dry his clothes, and then ate some more of the tinned meat.

'We must try to do more than a mile to a meal,' Valya said in a worried voice. 'Or else find out how to live on the country.'

'It would be something if we could find out how to stop the country living on us,' Hep muttered.

For the rest of the day they ploughed on through the forest. They talked very little, except when Grame had one of his impulses to impart information.

'Did you know that a tree raises about a hundred gallons of water a day from the ground?' he asked.

'I wish they'd raise themselves too,' Hep grunted. The fallen trees now lay thick, one on top of the other, and the giant thorn bushes linked branches across them.

They thought with regret of the clean country they had left behind. There was no more easy marching between trees and over spongy leaves. Bushes with tearing thorns now covered the ground like a monstrous mat.

‘And there might be dogs,’ Berrn said.

‘And there might not be dogs,’ Valya answered. ‘We have a worry circle. We should get out of it.’

Grame led the way, and tried, with the axe, to clear a path through the springy thorns. The others followed, sometimes entirely engulfed, sometimes with their heads just clearing the tops of the bushes.

Grame stopped to wipe the sweat from his brow. The blood from his hands streaked his face with red.

‘We’re doing a little less than a mile an hour,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘Might be easier on the high ground?’

No one answered, so he changed course and hacked upwards to the top of the hill. Here the thorns thinned, although the ground was covered with a wiry tangle of creeper, grossly flowered with green and pink blooms about ten inches across. Grame hesitated by the edge of these, and Hep came and stood beside him.

‘They’re carnivores,’ he said, and pointed to a flower that was closing over a little mouse-like creature. ‘Try touching one, Grame. Put your hand down its throat and tell me what it feels like,’ he said maliciously.

Grame bent down and put his hand slowly into the nearest bloom. The mottled petals folded gracefully round his forearm, and he imagined he felt a force like suction on his fingers. He pulled back violently, and some of the tangled creeper rose from the ground, but the flower held on. He cut at the creeper uselessly with the axe, then dropped it and tore the rubbery petals off his arm with his free hand. He was shaking when he turned to Hep.

‘Don’t look so worried,’ Hep said insolently. ‘They’re not big enough to eat you.’

'That's your idea of a joke, is it? I'll stick your head into one of them,' Grame said.

He took off his pack and swung it at Hep. It hit him on the chest and he staggered back. Grame leapt on him and smashed him on the side of the head with his fist. Hep reeled, recovered, and jumped. Grame went down on his back with Hep's knees on his stomach.

Valya and Berrn were shouting at them. Grame was momentarily too sick to move, and Hep was still bemused from the blow on his head. Grame managed to get one hand on his throat, but he couldn't strangle him with one hand. Berrn jumped on his arm and he let go; then Berrn and Valya pulled Hep off.

'What—what—what got into you two?' Valya shouted at them. 'You savages.'

Grame rolled over on his face and was sick.

'I made a joke and he didn't see it, so I got a swollen ear. Keep out of this, Valya. I'm willing to give the swollen ear back any time Grame wants,' Hep said.

'If you fight again I'll shoot you both,' Valya said in her brisk, business-like voice. 'Remember I have the only gun.'

'You can shoot yourself with it,' Hep suggested in a pleasant voice. 'Do you want to go on, Grame?'

Grame rolled over and stood up. Valya rushed between them, pulling at the gun on her belt. Grame stretched out one arm and knocked her aside. He and Hep were moving slowly towards one another when she fired. The bullet lifted a fraction of skin from his forehead. It felt as though someone had hit him on the head with a heavy stone. He stumbled, tripped on a creeper, and fell backwards into the flowers. Hep jumped at him and pulled him out as the petals began to wave.

'Have I killed him?' Valya asked.

'You haven't,' Grame mumbled.

'Near enough,' Hep said. 'It seems the fight's over. I

didn't think you'd fire. Not at him anyway,' he said staring at Valya.

'I'm glad you're all right, Grame. And I hope you both understand there's to be no fighting. I have the gun, and after this performance I'll see that I keep it.'

They put antiseptic on Grame's head and he got on his feet again.

'We'll go on,' he muttered. 'Not through the flowers.'

They made a long detour round the flowers and camped that night in a tiny clear space between the trees. Berrn lit the fire. He was in better condition now than the other men, although he complained steadily that his leg hurt.

Hep and Grame lay side by side in exhaustion.

'Do you feel better for the fight, Grame, or do you still want to kill me?' Hep asked. 'I'd like to know.'

'No, I don't want to kill you. Not now. I don't feel better. I still feel sick.'

'My fault,' Hep said. 'I think those ants ruined my temper. I wonder why she fired at you and not me.'

'She doesn't like me much.'

'It's time you grew up,' Hep said morosely, and fell asleep.

Valya came back, dragging a load of wood, and sat down wearily by the fire. Grame stayed awake for a time, watching her. It was his only consolation for the day behind him.

The next day they stayed on the high ground until it fell away and there was no choice but to work downhill through the vicious thorns, and when they had come down there was nothing but to go up again through more thorns. They made very little progress, and that night they had to camp without a fire. Grame cleared enough ground for them to sleep on, and they watched in turns through the night, each sentinel interpreting in his own way the noises in the bushes.

In the morning they struggled on uphill and down again. In the afternoon they reached the valley and the mud. The only trees that grew there were leafless and twisted, and at first the mud was a spongy mass dotted with islands of grass. As they went on, the mud grew deeper and the grass vanished. There was no place to camp, and they had to go on through the night. At first there was a moon, and they could see each other dark in the shining mud. Berrn fell. He had the weight of a pack on his back, and he was nearly drowned in the slime before Grame and Valya managed to pull him up. They went on. If they sank there would be nothing to show they had ever lived, only a few evanescent bubbles on the surface of the mud.

In the morning they found themselves by a wide, flat river. They had neither the heart nor the energy to make a raft. They were covered up to the necks with slime. Each of them chose a log for support, then stepped into the river. They walked as far as they could, then rested their arms on the logs and swam with their legs wavering, like wounded frogs.

When they reached the other side they climbed on the bank and up a small hill. It was at once obvious to them that they were on an island.

Valya's head drooped forward. 'We must go on. Can't stop here,' she muttered.

Berrn answered her by lying down and falling asleep.

'The island's safe and nearly dry,' Hep mumbled. 'Not many trees, no dogs.' He looked up and saw small filmy clouds drifting across the tender blue sky of the morning. 'Dry,' he repeated with satisfaction, and lay down.

They slept until nightfall, when they were wakened by heavy rain. In the darkness and the storm it was difficult to gather enough wood to make a shelter.

'Let's go back to the Amphibian,' Berrn mumbled.

‘Across that swamp? In the dark?’ Valya asked.

‘I’m going back,’ Berrn said.

He dropped the branch he was carrying and began to run down the hill to the river. He ran for about twenty yards and then fell. They heard his groans through the hiss of the rain.

Grame and Hep went down the hill and dragged him back to the shelter. He let himself be dropped in. It was raining at about half-strength inside the shelter.

‘I’m not going on,’ he said.

‘We’ll leave you if you talk like that,’ Valya threatened.

‘Then leave me. I’m not going on.’

When the morning came he was missing. Grame and Hep roamed about the island, looking for him. They found him sitting on the shore, staring at the swamp on the other side.

They pushed him up the hill again. ‘I’m not going on,’ he said. He didn’t listen to their arguments.

‘We won’t go on then. We’ll go back. Do you understand, Berrn? We’ll go back,’ Valya told him.

‘Yes,’ Berrn agreed, like an infant. ‘Go back.’

‘But we’ll go back this way,’ Valya said. ‘Not through the mud again. This way.’

She led the way down to the far side of the island. Berrn followed. He seemed to be pleased.

Grame strapped two logs together, put Berrn on top, and pushed him across the river. When they had landed they set off again on their north-west course.

‘Going back?’ Berrn asked, once or twice.

‘Going back,’ the others assured him.

‘In Africa,’ Grame said, ‘they might cure him by putting him to sleep for a month. It lets the trouble out of the mind.’

‘You know a lot, don’t you?’ Hep said unpleasantly. ‘If I put him to sleep, it will be for more than a month.’

They rearranged the equipment and what was left of the food so that Berrn had nothing to carry. He stumbled on, talking to himself interminably about Africa and the grading machine. He sometimes picked up twigs and chewed them; he showed no interest in where he was going and often bumped into trees. When he fell down the others picked him up, and he walked on without looking at them.

About midday he began crying for his mother, and fell down every few steps. They dropped the packs, then, and sat down to eat. They put food in his hands, and he threw it away. Hep crawled about, looking for the scraps. Berrn was talking about the Noble Abstraction now, and seeing vital particles in the air.

'If I listen to this much longer I'll lose my own reason. He's mad. He's out of his wits. This isn't anything that's going to be cured by a few days' rest,' Hep said.

He glared at Berrn and spoke to Valya and Grame. 'Maybe there's some reason why we have to go on into this murderous jungle looking for a mythical city until we're swallowed by a flower or kicked to death by toy horses. I don't know what the reason is, but it evidently exists, because we keep on doing it. I'm willing to pretend everything is all right, but I am not willing to pretend we can carry this lump of lunacy with us any further. Let him go, Valya. Let him wander off and die. If you won't let him go then kill him off now, without torturing him and us any more.'

Berrn paid no visible attention to this speech, except that half-way through it he began to sing. He continued to celebrate the fall of reason in a tenor chant while Valya argued that he might become sane just as suddenly as he had gone mad.

'All right, all right. He comes,' Hep shouted. He bent down to pick up his pack, and Berrn seized a lump of wood and hit him on the top of the head. He whirled the wood

round and leapt at Valya. Grame knocked him out before he reached her.

Hep was lying flat on his face, moaning curses. Valya went to the nearest stream, and came back with wet rags to bathe his head. When he sat up he wanted to kill Berrn immediately. 'Or the first time I'm alone with him,' he said when they held him back.

They waited ten minutes for Berrn to recover from Grame's blow. His first words were: 'I can walk. I can walk.'

'You see,' Valya said to Hep. 'He's nearly back to normal.' Berrn at once began to sing again.

They started off, Grame now carrying Hep's pack as well as his own. They survived the rest of the day, although towards the end Berrn was talking so fast that his words ran into each other like a series of crashing trains.

At the end of the day, when they were looking for a place to camp, Grame stopped and silently pointed ahead.

Valya and Hep looked, and saw a little heap of charred wood.

'It—it — people! Oh, Grame, it's been a real fire. Someone human made it!' Valya said.

'Don't be sure. In this country, it's just as likely a vegetable has acquired the knack,' Hep said.

They examined the charred wood carefully, but it was impossible for them to tell how long ago it had burnt.

'Let's build our own fire here to-night,' Hep suggested. 'It will make me feel I belong to the human race instead of just to a very small set.' He scowled at Berrn, who sat down and began to laugh, as though he had suddenly appreciated the point of a macabre joke.

When Hep was gathering wood, he came to a great slab of flat rock, measuring about thirty feet each way. At the eastern end, huge stones had been piled, one on top of the other, to make something remarkably like a rude stage.

Hep called Valya and Grame, and they stared at this structure in a confusion of hope and fear.

Grame became wildly elated. 'A vegetable didn't do this anyway,' he assured Hep gaily. 'I don't believe even ants could have managed it. But it doesn't look like a Golden City to me.'

'We haven't any proof that it's in use. It might be something the Britons built before they were all killed off by dogs,' Hep said.

'The natives may be friendly, but I think we'd better make a very small fire to-night. We don't want to attract any—any premature attention,' Valya said.

'We must have a fire anyway. Can you hear the dogs? I don't want to have my throat torn out by dogs before the Britons have had a chance to decapitate me,' Hep said.

They went back to the little heap of charred wood and lit their own fire beside it, then opened two of their last five tins of meat.

Valya said they should take it by turns to watch Berrn, but Hep suggested that they should wait until he slept and then tie his hands.

They sat talking by the fire, while Berrn raved away quietly to himself. It was many hours before Hep and Valya slept. Grame sat watching Berrn, wondering if the vital particle had already escaped from the leaking brain. When Berrn finally collapsed, Grame fastened his hands with the thongs he had prepared, and then lay down quickly to sleep.

When they woke in the morning they heard the sound of voices.

They eased themselves through the trees almost to the edge of the stone floor, and saw, for the first time, some of the inhabitants of Britain.

Chapter Seven

THERE WERE ABOUT a hundred people on the rock. They were white-skinned, whiter than the Boers, and of far less than average height. Even the men were scarcely five feet tall. They were thin-lipped, with narrow noses. On their shoulders they wore cloaks made from the skins of some smooth-haired animal, on their heads were small, tight, fur caps. Men and women both wore trousers of hide, tied round the ankles, but in spite of this some significant details of shape suggested the usual sexual differences, and in addition about half the assembly carried long, stone-tipped spears. It was reasonable to suppose that it was the men who were armed.

What made them all, men and women, peculiarly unattractive to the watchers was not only their alarming whiteness, but their entire lack of visible hair. No one had eyebrows; the men were beardless; no hair showed beneath the diminutive caps.

On the raised platform stood a man, dressed like the others, except that his cape was black.

He was intoning a kind of chant, and in spite of what Thorp had told them, they were stupefied by the discovery that the words he used were recognisable. Most of the vowels were broader and much longer; the consonants were slurred and sometimes altogether omitted, but the language was still recognisably a variant of the tongue that was spoken all over Africa.

‘Savages,’ Valya breathed in Grame’s ear. ‘And speaking a dialect of our own language. It’s a miracle.’

Grame shook his head in warning, and she was quiet. Even Berrn, standing foolishly beside them, didn’t speak.

The man on the platform chanted: ‘Let us fear. Thay says, Let us fear.’

‘Let us fear,’ the congregation answered.

‘Let us fear war with our neighbours the Yorks. For such a war would be our end. The Yorks are mighty. We would be utterly destroyed.’

‘We fear war,’ they chanted back. Some of the women began to cry.

‘Let us fear the failure of our crops. Thay is mighty, and can destroy the crops. Let us fear the destruction of our animals and the death of our hunters. Let us fear that we shall starve.’

‘We fear to starve.’

‘Let us fear illness, fire, death, destruction by the holy dogs. Let us fear our friends will die and leave us desolate in our old age. Let us fear madness.’

‘We fear. We fear illness, death, fire, dogs, fever, madness, desolation,’ the people answered at varying speeds, so that some of them were still being burnt while others were being eaten by dogs and the fastest were going mad.

‘Let us fear. For what we fear may never come to pass. Let us fear blindness and deafness and the crashing of trees on our heads. Only fear can save us. Thay will not do to us the things we fear, but if we fear Thay sufficiently he will destroy our enemies the Yorks and bring the trees down on their heads and the dogs into their homes.’

‘Let us fear Thay and blindness and deafness and the crashing of trees. Our fear may save us and destroy the Yorks.’

‘Let us fear the mighty crash and overpowering wind

with which Thay destroyed our ancestors. But let us worship those in the depths of the earth who were saved. Without these two we would not have lived to enjoy our happiness on earth.'

'Our happiness on earth,' the congregation repeated, weeping. Some of them knelt and banged their heads on the rock.

'Let us fear Thay will send us a messenger, for we are not yet sufficiently humble. Let us fear the messenger of Thay.'

Grame and Hep and Valya were so absorbed in the scene that they had forgotten the existence of Berrn. He chose this moment to walk quietly away from them and on to the stone floor, where he stood, with his hands still tied, giggling.

Most of the congregation had their foreheads on the rock, and for a stretched second they did not see him.

'Oh,' said Grame. He leapt forward, in a reckless lust for action, and strode on to the rock beside Berrn.

'I am the messenger of Thay,' he shouted.

The people looked, gave a terrible scream, and thumped their foreheads on the ground again.

The preacher turned and glared at Grame.

'Let us fear that this is not the true messenger of Thay. For he is not light-skinned but brown, browner than fallen leaves, browner than the bark of trees, brown as the earth itself. Let us fear that he does not come from Thay. Let us fear for his safety.'

'Let us,' said the crowd. Some of the men began to balance their spears shoulder-high.

Valya uttered a protesting cry, then rose and followed Grame into the centre with her hand on her gun. Hep groaned, and walked after her. The crowd shrieked again.

Grame waited for the noise to settle. 'How do you know Thay is not as brown as I am?' he shouted.

'Thay is the same colour as ourselves,' the preacher stated.

'Have you seen him?'

'No one has seen Thay.'

'Then how do you know what colour he is?'

'He has a pale skin, he has no hair, he made the big bang, he circled the world with a wind,' the crowd shouted variously. 'He shook the world with his hand and the mountains fell.'

One of the men aimed a spear at Grame, and instead it struck Berrn in the chest. He grunted and fell dead at once, with his tied hands stretched in front of him.

Grame didn't move. 'Now you may indeed fear the anger of Thay,' he said.

'We didn't mean to do it,' the crowd shouted.

'It was Thay who told me to throw the spear,' said the thrower nervously.

'That's right,' a little man said defiantly. 'It was ordered. We don't have a choice. When Thay makes up his mind we do what we're told.'

'I am the messenger of Thay,' Grame said indifferently. 'I order you to light a fire and burn this man.' He didn't look at Valya, but spoke quickly to her in a whisper. 'Don't shoot, Valya. We'll need the gun later.'

'Burn him! Burn a corpse!' the preacher said in horror.

'Yes, so that his vital spark may escape to join the Noble Abstraction.' The congregation didn't know what the words meant: they showed signs of being uneasily impressed.

'If he is burnt the smoke will defile our nostrils. You can't make us live in the smell of death.'

'Oh, yes, I can,' Grame said. 'Burn him.'

As he spoke he turned to Valya. 'Give me the gun,' he said, and took it before she could protest.

'Gather wood,' he said to the man who had killed Berrn,

‘or Thay will send a thunderbolt to strike you as you stand. Where would you like the thunderbolt to hit you—on the head or in the belly?’

‘Don’t listen to him,’ several voices advised, but the man who had thrown the spear said: ‘I will gather wood. I fear that this man may indeed be the messenger of Thay,’ he added apologetically. ‘I fear his thunderbolts.’

‘Let us fear the thunderbolts of the false messenger,’ the crowd shouted, and several of them began eagerly to gather wood. They laid the small twigs first, and Grame bent and lit them with his fire-box.

‘Let us fear the false messenger of Thay who lights fires without flint,’ the crowd chanted.

The priest remained on his platform studying the skies, and dissociating himself from the proceedings.

When the fire was blazing Hep and Grame laid Berrn’s body on it, while most of the savage Britons cowered with their heads on the ground. A few of them stared, and some others openly examined the brown strangers.

When the body was almost destroyed, Grame pointed to the sparks and cried in what he hoped was an impressively religious voice: ‘The vital particle flies up.’

‘This is not one of Thay’s thoughts,’ the preacher muttered, looking at Grame with hatred.

‘You’ve done it the wrong way, Grame,’ Valya whispered angrily. ‘You’ve antagonised them, instead of impressing them with our friendliness. And I want my gun back.’

Grame ignored her. ‘And now,’ he said, ‘I, the messenger of Thay, and my two companions, will accept your hospitality and eat and sleep to-night in your houses—huts—homes,’ he said, arriving at last at the understood words.

He waited. No one moved forward to invite them. The priest laughed.

‘Is no one brave enough to accept us as his guests?’ Grame asked angrily.

A strongly-built man, an inch or two taller than the others, and with a much broader face, stepped forward. He was one of those who had not been disconcerted by Berrn’s funeral fire, but had watched the strangers while it burnt.

‘I will invite you to my home, but not as a messenger of Thay,’ he said, glancing at the priest.

‘It is Thay’s will that strangers shall not be asked to the homes of his people,’ the priest said quickly.

The other man nodded. ‘I won’t ask strangers to my home,’ he said. ‘This man will live with me as my adopted son. I will also adopt his friends as my children.’

‘I’d like to know about my rights as an adopted son,’ Hep muttered.

‘How would you treat your adopted children?’ Grame asked.

‘The adopted son carries the wood and water, but as you may be the messenger of Thay that won’t be necessary. You will be fed and sheltered. You have names?’ he asked politely.

They told him their names.

‘I am Brown,’ he said. He began to walk slowly away, without looking back at the men with levelled spears who were beginning to gather round the priest. The three travellers walked with him, followed by a mixed crowd of worshippers and enemies. No spears were thrown.

In rather less than a mile, they came to a clearing that lay at the foot of an almost precipitous hill, where rock burst through the green grass, and only a few trees managed to cling to the slopes.

There were two or three rough enclosures on the clearing. They contained, to the surprise of the travellers,

animals that seemed very like sheep. There were also some strips of ground that looked as if they had been cultivated, but at the first glance there were no other signs of habitation. It was only by careful inspection that the holes in the base of the hill could be seen. It was not the holes that suggested human dwellings, but the rudely-woven barricades of branches that covered some of the holes.

‘They live in caves,’ Grame said in wonder. He thought of something else, and began to laugh. ‘It’s like the primitive history lectures,’ he explained. ‘They’ll be catching fish and erecting stone buildings soon.’

The cultivated strips looked very bare. Hep commented on this in a nervous growl.

‘It is spring,’ Brown said in surprise. ‘Only grass grows now. We grow grass for the wild cows; and for ourselves potatoes.’ He pronounced the word *pi-ietoss*, and Hep was momentarily puzzled. This kind of delayed understanding was often to occur; but however rude the dialect sounded, it was always recognisably an African dialect, and could sooner or later be puzzled out.

The villagers who had not attended the dismal prayer meeting crowded to the doors of their caves and stared and pretended not to stare, and stared again at the new arrivals. A child stood and gaped beside its mother, who snatched it up, beat it, threw it back into the cave, and turned again to stare at the strangers.

The leaders of the procession, particularly Brown, walked pompously, as though they had made a remarkable capture; while those who came behind, especially the priest, were visibly discontented. From the carefully neutral attitude of the villagers, Grame concluded that Brown was a man who was respected or feared almost as much as the priest.

When Brown led the way to his cave, his importance became obvious. His native followers gestured proudly

at the well-made door, and at the grass matting that lay on the floor inside. The followers, however, did not enter. Brown went in first, then beckoned to the Africans.

Grame went in. The cave was dark and high, lit brightly at one end by a wood fire. Wood smoke pricked at the nostrils and the throat; the other principal smell came from the meat that was cooking on the fire.

Brown pointed first to the meat, and then to his bald wife, whom he dragged forward in order to show the green stones that hung around her neck. She backed away quickly, and threw more wood on the fire until it leapt up so far that the smoky-rose light touched the distant rock ceiling.

The wife stirred the meat in the pot, and then turned and cuffed the two bald children who sat on the floor.

'You sleep here,' Brown said in his uncouth tongue, indicating a bundle of dried grass near the fire. He spoke to his wife, too quickly for the others to understand, and she trotted out with the children. The three of them returned in a few minutes with great armfuls of dried grass. They went back and forwards several times until extra couches had been prepared.

'You will be able to sleep, messengers of Thay,' Brown said in sardonic tones. 'First, eat.'

His wife handed them the cooking pot, and they pulled out the sweet greasy meat with their fingers. Grame and Hep ate ravenously and uncritically, but Valya dipped her fingers in the pot with an expression of repugnance. She was hungry enough to overcome her horror, and in the end even took her turn at drinking the hot gravy from the pot.

The three of them took only a few minutes to devour the entire meal, while Brown's wife watched in consternation and his children began to cry. Their mother slapped them both and gave them a handful of nuts, then pushed them

out of the cave, where they were instantly questioned by the waiting group.

'Are we safe here?' Valya asked Brown, and he puzzled over her words for a minute before he answered: 'Safe, now,' and nodded towards the latticed wood that formed the door.

His wife dropped it shut in the face of the spectators, who gave a moan of frustration, and then stooped to peer through the gaps.

Valya took out her notebook, determined to discover and record the habits of the natives as quickly as possible. As she was writing '1' on top of the first page, Brown began to question her eagerly in his ugly dialect.

'You are really messengers of Thay?' he began.

'We might be. And perhaps we're not,' Grame said in a voice of indifference. 'Is it important?'

'Thay might defend you, if you needed him,' Brown suggested.

'That reminds me,' Valya said. 'Give me back my gun, Grame.'

He handed it to her.

'Have you found that Thay is reliable?' Hep asked.

'Again please,' Brown said. 'I don't understand. You speak a very strange version of our tongue.'

'Have you found that Thav is to be trusted?' Hep repeated slowly.

'Thay is the thing we fear. We don't trust.'

'Is he your only god?'

'What is god?'

'Is he the only man you worship?'

'He is not a man. He is Thay. It was by the order of Thay that the earth opened and closed, in the big bang. It is also the order of Thay when the dogs come or our people are sick. If our spears break, Thay has done it. No one knows what Thay will do next. Thay

might even send a messenger who does not know what Thay is.'

Hep laughed. 'Is it possible to sleep safely without depending on the protection of Thay?'

The question was answered immediately by the sudden collapse of the door. Half a dozen bald-heads were pushed into the cave by a dozen more behind. They carried flint-tipped daggers.

'Strike down the false messengers of Thay,' suggested the priest's voice.

Brown stood up. He seemed to be angry. 'My cave,' he stated. Then he stood back beside Grame and Hep, muttering, 'Let Thay do something to defend his messengers.'

Valya, whose personal courage was always magnificent, said coolly to the intruders:

'You wish to hear the voice of Thay? We carry his voice,' she added carelessly. 'In your pack, Hep. The speaking machine,' she said quickly.

Hep pressed open the straps and brought out the miniature box. There were only three tapes. He snatched the first one and pressed it in the box. He had no idea what it was.

The men with the daggers hesitated, and looked back at the priest for instruction. 'Thay's voice is not carried in a bag like nuts,' the priest advised.

'Stand by now,' the voice of the machine said, 'to hear the authentic sound of the first atomic explosion in the entire history of the world. This truly colossal development heralds a new era of peace and prosperity for United Africa. Listen, now, to the sound of the old world's passing. Are you ready for the great division of the atom? The wires are about to be touched. *Here we go.*' There was a ghastly roar that lasted for two minutes. Before it finished all the intruders, including the priest, had vanished from the cave. Then the announcer's voice, strangely diminished, said:

‘That was quite a bang, wasn’t it? The explosion took place at a distance of twenty-five miles from the listening machine.’ The machine clicked. The tape was over.

Brown stared at his visitors. ‘That is a useful little box,’ he said. ‘How is it made?’

Hep opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. ‘It is a present from Thay,’ he said. He turned quickly to Valya. ‘I didn’t know they’d made a record of that. I didn’t even know about the explosion as a certainty. I’d heard rumours. And I have to come to Britain to find they’re true.’

‘They’ve managed to divide the atom and make an explosion,’ Grame said in a dazed voice.

‘The yellow men of America have done the same,’ Valya said curtly. ‘They let our spies hear about their first results. They thought they’d terrify us into handing over the Disputed Islands. But now we have a weapon to destroy every city in America—and every one of the Disputed Islands, if we wanted to be rid of them.’

‘A bomb of the divided atom!’ Grame repeated. ‘It must be a chain reaction, of course.’ He stood thinking. ‘But if it struck some other radio-emitter in the earth—that might lead to the end of the world.’

‘Nonsense,’ Valya said, as briskly as ever. ‘Our weapon makes us stronger, that’s all.’

‘Even the messengers of Thay don’t like the message of Thay,’ Brown observed maliciously. He had been listening without understanding many of the words, but it hadn’t been possible to watch Grame and Hep without observing their confusion and dismay. ‘Now sleep,’ Brown said. ‘I don’t think even the priest will return to listen to the noise-box.’

The three travellers lay down on the grass couches. They were exhausted, blistered, wounded: every muscle had been stretched to the limit of endurance; their minds were

grinding with the need for sleep and forgetfulness; but the record they had played to impress the primitives drove sleep from them as effectively as it had driven the Britons from the cave.

Grame had in front of him the picture of a disintegrating world. Hep lay with his eyes wide open.

'Suppose the yellows had a weapon to destroy every city in Africa?' he asked Grame.

'They're scientifically far behind us,' Valya, wide-awake, assured him. 'We have an information service, you know.'

'I'll remember it when we get back and find Africa isn't there,' Hep said. 'Thanks for the tape, anyway, Valya. Whatever it did to the natives, it certainly frightened me.'

'I feel terribly sick,' she said. 'What do you suppose was that meat we ate?'

Grame began to laugh. 'It was horse,' he said. 'You've eaten a mutation, Valya. I'm not surprised you're sick.'

Chapter Eight

GRAME SLEPT intermittently through the late afternoon and evening; waking to hear the squabbling of Brown's children; to look through the pink smoke at the dark-red fire; or to listen to the staccato groans that Hep sent out, like Morse code, from his dreams. As the night moved towards its middle depths of silence, Grame floated down through the opalescent layers of sleep into the dark tunnel.

When he woke, there was no sign of Brown, and daylight had come like arrows through the latticed door of the cave.

Brown's wife offered him some strips of dried meat. He ate voraciously. He tried to speak to her, but she moved back against the wall of the cave, her greenish eyes rolling desperately in her pink face. When he stepped towards her she fell on the ground and whimpered. Humility enraged him; he liked women who were fierce and brave, like Valya. He looked contemptuously at the woman on the ground, and then lovingly at Valya, who still slept. Hep was lying, face down, breathing as heavily as if he had just begun to sleep. Grame looked at him doubtfully, decided to let him lie, and went out alone.

There was no one to be seen near the caves except a handful of children, lying on their naked bellies with their arms immersed in a muddy pool. One child glanced round, saw Grame, and whirled off, with the others squealing after him, like a litter of little pigs; then the clear-

ing was empty. Grame walked through it into the thin edge of the forest, and on until the trees grew closer. He heard the sound of voices and moved delicately towards them. Looking through a gap in the trees, he saw the people in the small clearing, and swung himself silently on to the branch of a tree.

Two people, whose sex was not at first easily determined, advanced on a fat elderly woman who stood waiting, arms extended, the traditional victim in the self-sacrificial trance. They seized her, threw her on the ground, and beat her with their fists. Grame watched in angry doubt. He supposed he should intervene, but he had no weapons, and to-day no desire for trouble. It seemed better to let things take the course they would have taken in his absence.

The woman lay panting on the ground, rolling her eyes at the two who stood over her, who now appeared to be women also. These two waited, smiling rather horribly, until she sat up, smiling also. She patted herself all over. They patted her too. She got up, went to a bundle that lay near, and came back dangling a long strip of red meat. The two accepted it. They all raised their eyes to the tree-tops together, then the woman, still recling uncertainly after her torments, walked away.

Another woman appeared, younger, but nearly as fat. They laid her on a bed of stones, about six feet square. One of the two conductors of the ceremony rolled the new victim along the stones to the other, who rolled her back and then waited, panting, until she returned. The rolling started slowly enough but became faster and faster until sweat dripped down the conductors' white capes. This woman was weaker than the other: she soon began to scream.

When the rolling had stopped and the screaming had died away they laid her on the ground, massaged her scalp,

and anointed it with oil. She put her fingers to her head, then smelt them appreciatively. 'Next year I come again,' she said.

'Next month,' they said in threatening voices, and she agreed hastily. She gave them a bundle wrapped in wet leaves and thanked them profusely. 'It looks like rain,' she said as she went away, strangely, because the sky was blue.

The two torturers were left alone in the clearing. Grame waited until they had gone before he climbed down from his observation post.

He went back through the woods to the cave. Valya and Hep were awake, and he began to describe to them the bewildering scenes he had witnessed.

Brown came in while he was talking.

'It's the women's service,' he explained. 'All the women must do it, or Thay will object.'

'But why?'

'Women have always done so and now they must always do so. It is one of the things arranged by Thay. The priest explains it. If the women don't go to this service, their husbands know they are not to like them any more. With the service, they will live for ever and be beautiful.'

'But they don't live for ever, do they?' Valya asked.

'Naturally not. No one expects this. Neither do they expect them to be beautiful. But it is the service. It has always been done, so it must always be done. If the woman doesn't go to it the husband may turn her away.'

As he talked, Brown dropped on the floor of the cave the carcass that he had carried on his shoulder. He took out a knife and began to divide the meat into sections.

Valya had her notebook out. 'You are a hunter?' she asked.

'No. I make spears, give them to hunters, get meat.'

'Can't they make their own spears?'

'I make the best spears. One pig in twenty that my spears kill is mine.'

'Is that better than hunting?' Valya asked.

'Hunters often die in the forest. I make spears, stay here, and don't die yet.'

'This one's no primitive, anyway,' Hep said. 'He's modern commercial man, out of time and place here, I'd have thought.'

'Perhaps he's the only one who isn't a mutation,' Grame said.

'I personally believe these people once had quite an advanced form of civilisation,' Valya said. 'It's well-known they were the first people to invent fireworks.'

'You don't mean they were destroyed by fireworks?' Hep protested. 'That they blew themselves up with a Catherine wheel, or something of the sort.'

'Oh, no. It's true they talk about mighty crashes and big bangs and so on, but that must have been a natural catastrophe, like an earthquake. Anyway, I agree with you. This one's unusually intelligent. Are you the richest man in the village?' she asked Brown.

'Richest?'

'Do you have more money?'

Brown looked furtive. 'Money is a bad word,' he said. 'Thay is angry when we talk of money. Too much talk: another Big Bang.'

'What was the Big Bang?'

'A long time ago the mountains clapped their hands and bowed to the sea. Cities burrowed into the earth and stayed there.'

'What is a city?'

'If I talk of cities Thay will be angry.'

'Can't you say what a city is?'

'A city is a bad place of stone.'

'And the golden city—what is that?' Valya asked.

Brown looked even more evasive. 'Mention of that place makes Thay very angry.'

'Fine,' Hep said. 'Let's talk of something that won't make Thay angry. Do you have many dogs round here?'

'The dogs belong to Thay.'

'You mean you're not allowed to talk of them either?'

'Everyone talks about dogs. Nearly all the time,' Brown explained patiently. 'But we are not allowed to kill them. Only the goodfellows can kill them.'

'How many goodfellows are there?'

'There are five. Never any more. No one else is allowed to be a goodfellow with them.'

'Do you mean if the dogs came here and attacked you it would be against the rule for you to kill them?'

'I would send for the goodfellows.'

'And if they weren't there?'

'I would not be able to kill the dogs while Thay was watching,' Brown carefully explained.

'How do you get to be a goodfellow?'

'There are only five. When one dies, they choose another. Perhaps his son. And even the goodfellows are not allowed to kill too many dogs. Not more than five each in one week.'

'That sounds like a restrictive practice,' Valya said disapprovingly. She had been taking rapid notes, but now she put down her pencil. 'I think we have enough on that, Hep. I do agree that he's not nearly as primitive as our own bushmen. What a pity we couldn't get him to the grading machine. We must try him on the cards. Or should we measure his head first?'

'Leave him alone,' Hep advised. 'He might get around to re-inventing fireworks, soon. Anyway, you work it out. I'm going to look at those sheep. I only had a glance at them yesterday, but they seemed very normal. I like to

brood over something that's not mysterious.' He walked out of the cave, and Grame got up to follow him.

'Stop, Grame,' Valya said, and he stopped. He was annoyed. His morning wave of affection vanished. He didn't like to be ordered about, and he realised that Valya was always ordering him about. Brown was listening; it was obvious they couldn't quarrel in front of him.

'That pack, Grame,' Valya said, pointing.

'I like you in a lot of ways, Valya,' Grame said in his mildest voice, 'but not when you're impersonating the surgeon speaking to his blundering assistants. Here's the pack.'

'What? Have I said something to annoy you?' Valya asked in amazement. 'Here, help me fix these.'

When they had adjusted the delicate twelve-way calipers they approached Brown.

'We want to measure your head,' Grame said apologetically.

'Why?'

'To see how intelligent you are.'

'How?'

'How clever. How wise.'

'Look at the size of my cave; the food that hangs from the roof; the number of my sheep. Look at the stones that hang round my wife's neck,' he suggested. 'No other woman has such stones.'

'No,' Valya said. 'We want to see how potentially I—mean, we want to see how clever you could be if you tried.'

'We want to see if we can work out the size of your brain,' Grame said. 'To estimate—to try to count—how many little cells you have in your head.'

'Cells?'

'Little round, spongy things,' Grame said. 'Too small to see.'

Brown put a finger to his head. 'They are soft, these cells?' he asked dubiously.

Grame took a sheet of paper and began to draw a mass of tiny interlocking circles. 'That's what they look like, only smaller. Some of them remember, and some of them explain what your eyes see or your ears hear.'

'Strange,' Brown said. He took the sheet of paper from Grame. 'What is this stuff?'

'It's paper. You make it from trees. You make the wood very soft and then—and then you roll it very thin.'

'Just to draw such pictures!' Brown said, looking contemptuously at Grame's circles. 'You have seen my pictures? They are better.'

He beckoned them to the back of the cave. There, scratched out where the stone was smoothest, were the lively outlines of leaping deer, little trotting horses, and something that looked like a tiger jumping on a man.

'Remarkable,' Valya said quietly to Grame, 'if only they had been done by a child.'

'You drew these?' she said to Brown.

'No. I gave the drawer meat. The priest and me, we both gave him meat for drawing the pictures. Then the drawer went mad.' He touched his forehead then bent down and outlined the sign of an arrow, like a distorted V, on the dust of the floor. 'We burnt this sign on his forehead, because he saw visions, and sent him into the woods. There are no more drawings. Only mine and the priest's,' he said with respect.

'They're cave drawings. I've heard about them. People think highly of them,' Grame said in awe.

'Only if they were done thousands of years ago,' Valya said contemptuously. 'These are new. They don't count. I don't think they're important at all, except as an indication of the level of artistic skill. But—we'll get Hep to copy

them. They are not absolutely without interest. Brown, it's because we think you're wise we want to measure your head.'

'I'll get you a dead man,' Brown promised. 'Then you can open his head and count these little round things inside it. Outside the head is only bone.'

'Could you give him a present?' Grame suggested. 'Is there something we have that we don't want?'

'We had beads. But they were all lost, that first day.'

Brown was listening carefully. 'Let me touch the box, the present from Thay that bangs,' he said. 'Then measure my head.'

Reluctantly they handed over the miniature speaking-machine, and he fingered it with what might have been reverence.

'This lump is pressed,' he said, touching the button, and listening to the whirring of the needle, 'and then—where is the bang?'

'I'll let him have one of the other tapes,' Valya said. 'I think they're musical.'

She put a tape in the box, Brown pressed the button again, and they heard the long, triumphant strains of the betrothal dance; the strings calling to the spirit and the trumpets exalting the heart.

Grame listened and watched Valya. Her face wavered and changed, as though he saw it through moving water.

'It's the betrothal dance for the best—the—the noblest. They dance with the essence vials on their feet. At each step, they soar high in the air, and float down and rise again in each other's arms. It's very wonderful,' she said to Grame.

Brown was watching the machine carefully. 'It is very wonderful,' he agreed. 'The black tape runs round against the thorn and makes the noise. But how is the noise put in the tape?'

'Thay makes the noise,' Valya said briskly. Brown looked unconvinced.

'Now we'll measure your head,' Grame said quickly.

They put the callipers on his head and Valya wrote down the measurements.

'These are very good,' she said uneasily. 'I think we should try the others. Brown, get me some other men to measure.'

His light brown eyes wandered back to the speaking machine. 'Very difficult, unless—will you let me work the machine for them?'

'I don't think,' Grame began doubtfully, but Valya interrupted him. 'Yes, you may,' she said decisively. He went out of the cave.

'You're giving away all our prestige. If he can make the machine speak, what do we get out of it?' Grame protested.

'We're not staying here. Don't forget. We're going on to the city. All we want here is a few facts about the natives.'

Brown returned, trailing a dozen men behind him. They all wore the sullen, secret expression that seemed already to Grame to be typical of the white cave-men—with the exception of Brown.

The speaking-machine lay in the middle of the cave. Brown went to it instantly and pressed the button. The betrothal music soared once more through the murky cave, and two or three of the men turned to run. Brown spoke to them sharply in the tone of the natural commander, and they crept back and stood obediently by the machine. It was the first time they had been forced to listen to music, and it disheartened them entirely. They stood meekly while Brown pulled off their caps, exposing their baldness, took the callipers from Valya, and fitted them on the first man's head. The man opened his mouth to yell, and then lost control of his muscles, so that he stood with his mouth

hanging open until the callipers were removed from his head.

Valya wrote down the figures. When all the men had been measured Brown pushed them from the cave, and then looked inquiringly at Valya.

'Your measurements have a better ratio than theirs,' she told him. Brown turned and went to the back of the cave. 'Actually his measurements have a better ratio than ours,' she said unenthusiastically.

'He's a throw-back,' said Hep, who had just come in. 'I'd like to know what he throws back to.'

Brown came to them again. He had a flint knife and a stick in his hand.

'One,' he said, and cut one notch. 'Two, three.' He showed them the notches. 'Now.' He touched the pen in Valya's hand, and looked as she wrote down the figures. He copied them with his finger on the dust of the floor, then went out and came back with a lump of chalk.

'I'll show you,' Grame said willingly. He took the chalk and drew the figures, from one to nine, on the wall. Brown began to copy them, holding up his fingers before each one, to make sure he had the numbers right.

'Come on, Grame,' Hep said impatiently. 'We're supposed to be examining the culture of these people, not the other way round.'

'I'll stay,' Grame said. He liked the chance of instructing someone. Hep and Valya went off, and Grame stayed with Brown. By the afternoon he could write any number up to a hundred and was asking if words could be written.

'Is there anyone else like you here?' Grame asked.

'The priest is clever,' Brown said absently, 'and perhaps three others. I think I am more clever than these others. I am not certain about the priest. I will order him to see you,' he added magnificently.

'Don't ask the priest now, I think I'd like a quiet day.'

Brown went on chalking. 'I think the priest could learn the numbers too. I might teach the others. If I do, I will not be the only person to know. That would be a pity. But these numbers will not be very useful if I am the only one to know them. If the priest knows, then he will ask Thay, and Thay will say numbers are good. Then when he dies he will tell the next priest, and numbers will stay. All the things that are good to know are told from priest to priest — and all the things that are bad to know, too. So I should tell the priest, but he is my enemy. What would you do, Grame?'

'He won't like numbers, if he knows they come from me,' Grame suggested, although he felt excited by the idea that with this day's work he might be introducing the system of written arithmetic to the entire British people.

Brown looked disappointed. 'I'll wait until you go—but first, you will show me how one number is taken away from another?'

He went out then, to count the sheep belonging to his neighbours, so that he could write all the figures down and arrive at the total.

Hep wandered back. 'The cows are very small and they are all wild,' he announced. 'They turn them up and milk them into the air. They get about an eggcupful of milk out of twenty minutes' work. Someone should tell them. Have you got to the binomial theorem yet? I don't know where Valya is. She wandered off.'

Valya had gone off alone with her notebook. She wanted to talk to some of the women. There were a dozen of them lying down idly in the sunshine in the clearing. She went to them, but when she tried to engage them in conversation they turned their heads away, giggling, and then, when she persisted, walked away quickly. It seemed to her that the best way to get to know them would be in their own homes.

She walked on until she came to a cave with the door down, and looked cautiously in.

A family sat on the ground, eating from an earthenware pot. The woman was talking shrilly at what seemed to a stranger an incomprehensible rate. The man ate and grunted. Three children sat around the pot, and occasionally tried to get their hands into it. When this happened, either the man or the woman struck them aside. They usually fell rather heavily, bumping their heads. A younger child at the back of the cave was learning to walk, and trying to walk towards the food. It fell, often on its head. Valya began to make quick notes.

When the man had finished eating he grunted more loudly, and lay down to sleep. The woman took a last plunge at the pot, then licked her fingers and beckoned to the children, who rushed with squeaking excitement at the remnants. When they had finished gnawing the bones they dropped them among the other refuse on the ground. The bigger children kicked the smaller children, who screamed. The man woke and hit the nearest child, the wife hit two of the others, the man, still lying down, seized his wife by the ankle and pulled her to the floor with a crash.

Valya hurried away. She had decided not to go in and speak to the woman in her own home.

'The family is the unit,' she wrote in her book. 'Is this a good thing? Some caves smell. Meat? Smoke? Head-bumping,' she wrote, and underlined it.

She walked past several other caves before she stopped again. Here a curtain of loosely plaited grass hung before the mouth of the cave. Inside she saw a young woman scraping the rubbish into a heap with a broom made of stiff twigs. The fire burned clear, and before it sat an old man, whittling wood into spears. Two children sat beside him, picking up the scraps. An infant squawked on the ground, and crawled to the woman, collapsing occasionally

and bumping its head. The woman picked it up. Valya smiled approval at this tidy and industrious home.

She pushed aside the green curtain and entered the cave. The children looked up, roared with terror, and dashed past her. The old man dropped his spears and tottered after them. The woman snatched the broom and threw it at Valya as she rushed past with her baby.

'The people are naturally timid,' Valya wrote in her book, and entered the cave to study the cooking utensils, which were made of clay, ugly, misshapen, and slushy with grease. The only implements visible were two flint knives and a stirring stick that stood in one of the pots. Valya was bending to examine this when she heard a commotion at the entrance. She looked round. Six of the naturally timid people stood there, brandishing spears.

'Put those spears down,' she said in commanding tones.

The priest's triumphant face appeared over the shoulders of the other men.

'Seize the woman,' he cried, and Valya's hand went to her gun-belt, but it was too late. One of the men hit her on the neck, and she was flung on her back. The priest stepped forward and touched her with his foot.

'This messenger of Thay has entered a cave without permission. This messenger of Thay is not a messenger of Thay's, but a friend of Brown's. What shall we do with her? Shall we fling her to the dogs?'

One of the men made another suggestion. The priest looked at him malevolently. 'Thay has put it in my head that you should also go to the dogs,' he said, and the man cowered away.

Brown appeared in the mouth of the cave. He did not look at Valya. 'Thay gives orders through your mouth, and my adopted child must die,' he said regretfully to the priest.

'Thay is all-powerful,' the priest said sadly.

'Thay's orders are not usually so clear.'

'This is a great occasion and Thay has come to the defence of his people.'

'We must fear the voice of Thay,' Brown agreed. 'We must also fear that our elderly lawyers will make a new law.'

'And what will be the nature of this new law?' the priest asked politely.

'It may recall an older law. That the priest of Thay is an honoured guide to the fear of Thay, but that only our elderly lawyers may send a man or woman to the dogs.'

'So you don't fear Thay's voice?' the priest asked unpleasantly.

'I fear Thay and the actions of Thay. I fear that when Thay wishes to destroy, he destroys. I have never learnt that Thay empowers his priest to destroy.'

'This woman entered this cave and drove out the cave-dwellers. The elderly law-makers themselves would order her death.'

'Then we can agree that they should meet and decide,' Brown said smoothly.

'We can agree and they shall meet. Meanwhile, I keep the woman.'

'The woman may be Thay's messenger. Fearing Thay's anger if she or you should come to harm before the lawyers meet, I shall keep the woman. Then her companions will not be angry and harm the priest of Thay.' He bent down, lifted Valya, and walked with her out of the cave, ignoring the spears that touched his neck as he passed. He took her back to his own cave without speaking to her.

'It's nothing, just a little trouble,' she said evasively to Hep and Grame.

Brown explained what had happened.

'Anyway,' Valya said defiantly, 'we'll be able to attend a meeting of the elders. It ought to be socially instructive.'

'What notes we'll take just before we're trampled to death or burnt alive or whatever they do!' Hep said.

'Why did you go in the cave?' Brown asked.

'I wanted to ask the woman about herself—the work she did, and how she had her children, and how it was arranged she should marry,' Valya said wearily.

'Marry?'

'Live with the man she lives with.'

'It was arranged because she went in the woods with him and the dogs did not attack them, so they came back to her father's cave. All the young people go to the woods. Some of them go to the dogs, some of them come back and share a cave and have children. I will answer these questions for you. It is a crime to enter a cave unasked.'

'Why do they go to the woods? How many come back?' Valya asked. She was making a brave effort to pretend she hadn't been frightened by the priest.

'Many are killed by the dogs. Then we have enough caves. They don't want to go. But when we find they try to sleep together then we drive them to the woods. If some weren't eaten by the dogs, what would happen? There are no caves to spare.'

'It would be better to let them build a house,' Grame said.

'A house?'

'A shelter, made of wood. It's not necessary to live in caves.'

'A shelter, made of wood,' Brown repeated, in an interested voice. 'You will show me, Grame?'

'As well as I can,' Grame took the chalk and drew a

rough picture on the wall. Brown studied it. 'One could build many of them,' he said absently, 'and give them to people, perhaps in exchange for some meat.'

'Rush him on with his arithmetic,' Hcp said to Grame. 'He's just about ready for rent, profit, and interest.'

Chapter Nine

ALL THAT NIGHT in the cave Brown groaned noisily. In the morning he got out of bed with his face swollen. 'Oh, Thay, how have I sinned?' he asked. He went to his wife.

'Put your hand in my mouth and remove this tooth,' he shouted at her.

She put her hand in his mouth. 'I can't move it,' she said, falling on her knees.

'I must go to the operator, then,' he said.

'The operator is gathering grass for his sheep. He will not come to anyone.'

'We will give him the last of our potatoes.'

'Ree's wife offered him two bags. He refused.'

'Offer him your greenstone necklace.'

'He won't operate. He will only operate now on those who are mad.'

Brown groaned louder than before. 'Go out now and say that I am mad.'

'Thay would be offended,' she said, backing away. 'You are not mad.'

'I think we should try to help,' Valya whispered. 'I'm sure I could pull a tooth if I tried.'

'Please, he's our only friend. No amateur dentistry, Valya, it would cost us our lives,' Hep said in appeal. 'Let's slip out and leave things to take their course.'

'So you say I'm not mad,' Brown shouted to his wife.

‘Put your hand in my mouth again and pull the tooth away.’

She was trembling when she put her hand in. ‘I can’t,’ she said, and he bit her hand until she screamed. He let go and she ran away from him with blood dripping from her finger, and staining the green grass mat with red. She pointed at this, sobbing.

‘So I’m not mad,’ Brown shouted again. He picked up his smaller child and flung it at his wife.

‘You’re mad,’ she shouted. She charged across the room and hit him on his swollen cheek. He snatched an earthenware pot and threw it at her. It missed, but the hot greasy soup splashed all over the floor and ruined the grass mat for ever.

The wife screamed again and rushed out of the cave, shouting, ‘He’s mad. Take him to the operator.’ Other people came from their caves into the clearing, all shouting, ‘Mad, mad, take him to the operator.’

Four of the strongest young men came together to Brown’s cave. They carried wooden cudgels, and as Brown reeled towards them the leader tapped him on the head. Brown yelped and dropped into their arms.

They dragged him quickly to the centre of the clearing, where the operator already waited, stripped of all his clothing but a five-inch long skirt. He was a strong man, and his muscles twitched as he bent over the armoury of flint probes and hammers that lay on the wet grass beside him.

The four men dropped Brown on the ground. His eyelids were quivering. Two men sat on his arms, one held his legs down, and the fourth knelt on his forehead. The spectators formed a moaning ring, with Brown’s wife just inside it, her face plastered with mud. She constantly picked up more mud and rubbed it on her forehead.

The man who knelt on Brown’s head was evidently

experienced. At a signal from the dentist he slipped a piece of wood between Brown's jaws.

The dentist, by lying flat on the ground between the man who held Brown's right arm and the one who sat on his head, was able to see into Brown's mouth, although not far enough, for he crawled to the other side, and finally behind Brown's head, where he peered past the other man's knee, and looked with increasing gravity into Brown's mouth.

He raised himself to his haunches and looked at the sky. 'Push him down,' he intoned, and the assistants pressed on Brown's head, arms, and legs, sweating with the effort to increase their own weight. 'Push him down,' the audience chanted. 'Push him down,' said Brown's wife, plastering more mud on her face. 'Push him down, down,' the children, skipping on the edge of the ring, cried with the gross excitement of the very young who are being allowed to join in adult ceremonies.

The operator took a flint, as long and fine as a needle, and rolled it between the palms of his hands while he raised his eyes absently to the dripping trees. He rolled the flint faster and faster until he had secured the desired rhythm, and then thrust it into Brown's mouth. The audience kept up the chant: 'Push him down,' the needle rotated, and Brown's face, usually a chalky pink, began to change colour as the pressure in his veins increased. He passed through red and purple to something that was nearly black, but this last colour seemed to indicate unnatural strength, for with a great heave he freed one leg, and flailed it around wildly until volunteers from the audience jumped forward and sat on it, three in a row.

The operator sighed and went on drilling, although the drill now rotated slowly, as though it had met greater resistance. He stopped, with more deliberation than seemed

necessary, selected a flat-ended flint, placed it in Brown's mouth, and hit it with a flint hammer. Fifty strokes seemed to satisfy him. He took a small piece of soft clay, and, holding it between his fingers, put his whole hand into Brown's mouth. When he withdrew his hand the clay had taken the shape of the new hole in Brown's tooth. He chose a piece of flint smaller than the tooth, and chipped it into a shape clearly resembling the clay. He smeared this with some soft substance that was not clay, and then put his hand in Brown's mouth again. When he had pushed the flint in he took the hammer and gave a final tap.

Then he stood up, groaning, and put on his cloak. The men kept sitting on Brown.

Brown's wife crawled to the operator on her hands and knees. 'Will he live?' she asked him timidly.

He didn't look at her. 'It's in the hands of Thay,' he said indifferently. 'Five have died and twelve have lived. Better to die than to live as a madman.'

Brown's wife renewed her sobbing. 'He'll die,' she said. 'He'll die. You've killed him.'

A mutter ran round the crowd. 'You've killed him. Why didn't you pull out the tooth. That is the only safe way.'

The operator, who only a moment ago had been the man in charge; the superior; the giver of orders, now seemed a shiftless and defiant serf.

'The safe way is to find how to keep the tooth. Without teeth, how can a man eat? If he can't eat, how can he live?'

'If he dies, it will be because you have killed him,' cried a score of belligerent voices.

'If I don't find how to keep the tooth, you will all lose all your teeth. Who will feed you, when you can't chew?' the operator mumbled. He gathered his instruments up and began to push his way through the crowd.

A new mutter arose. 'It's Brown's own fault. It's because he took in the false messengers of Thay.'

The operator was allowed to escape, while some of the people inveighed against him, and some against Brown, who had by now lost consciousness. A few volunteers carried him back to his cave, while his wife bemoaned his probable death.

'I give them about two minutes to discover it's our fault,' Hep said. 'I'm for the woods, and a little quiet musing about nature until the excitement's died down.'

Grame hesitated. 'Do you suppose there's something we could do for Brown?'

'Just leave him alone,' Hep advised. 'If he dies, it may cheer him up to realise he's not dragging us down into the darkness with him. Although I don't think people have any altruistic feelings when they die. A death bed is always occupied by a man alone with himself. When I die I'll see the truth—the world is nothing but my experience, and it ends with me.' He spoke in a black voice, looking at the others with such melancholy that they were glad when he turned away from them and walked alone into the woods.

They were left with the invidious voices.

'Brown will die,' a very small man said threateningly, to Grame.

'Because he took in the false messengers of Thay,' another said.

'Because he touched the box that contains the voice of Thay.'

'Because he lent his head to the strangers. That was when the madness entered.'

Grame turned, and picked the nearest enemy up by the head, so that the weight of his body swung painfully from the neck.

'Don't rejoice,' Grame said. 'If Brown dies because he

allowed us to measure the shape of his head, you others who were also measured will also die. But don't be afraid. Brown will live, and then perhaps you will live too. So hope for Brown's life,' he added, giving the man a last vicious swing and dropping him. The man was frightened, and cringed away. Grame didn't know whether he'd made him into an enemy or a slave. When he thought about it, he was afraid that the two were the same.

He walked with Valya through the trees under the pale green leaves. The birds, like an uncoordinated orchestra, were celebrating the safe arrival of the spring. The forest, which had once seemed full of ferocious enemies, had become a welcoming sanctuary. Grame walked rapidly; only half-conscious of Valya; revelling in the exuberance of the forest. He looked up to the freshly-washed sky that tossed above the leaves, and tried to remember the dinginess of his life in the hut, while he saw the spectrum in every dew-drop. For this hour there was no mystery in the forest; everything in Nature was an answer instead of a question. The imprint of tree and leaf and bird bit into his mind.

'What about Brown?' Valya said.

'Brown,' he repeated happily. 'He'll be building his house to-morrow. I might look for the kind of wood he needs. I like Brown.' He walked about, choosing the best of the dead branches.

'These forests will go on when all our concrete has vanished,' he said to Valya in exultation.

Even as he spoke, he thought that he wasn't happy; that he wanted more than the forest; that he must find the city; walk through the streets that had been silent for a thousand years; unearth the relics of the civilised man who might in another epoch of time have been his natural friend.

He continued to gather wood for Brown, automatically choosing straighter pieces of a fairly uniform size. When

he came back with news of the city, he would be transformed into a hero. He might even be given a physics laboratory and an observatory of his own, he thought, looking up at the trees and filling them at once with questions.

'Grame,' Valya said. 'Have you ever thought what it would be like to live here for ever, in the peace of the forest?'

'Dogs and swamps?'

'Yes, but no one expecting anything of you. Nothing to do but wait for the sun to rise, and then nothing but wait for it to set.'

'Nothing?' Grame asked. His mind was a confusion of observatories and golden cities, and he was speaking to Valya without thinking of her.

'There are some things one can do after sunset,' she said alarmingly. 'Grame, I've decided I don't want to be a bride of the state any longer. I think it would be a good thing if you and I got married. Would to-morrow suit you?'

The observatory and the golden city vanished. Grame was badly frightened. 'Who's going to marry us?' he asked.

'The preacher here. The Thay-man.'

'Valya! The priest. The priest of Thay. But you can't mean that? What do we think of Thay? Why, it's an absolutely dishonest suggestion. It would be better—anyway,' he finished unhappily, 'do you think a marriage like that would count at home? And wouldn't the state have to divorce you first?'

A more experienced woman would have seen with what spontaneous skill he was obscuring her offer, but Valya continued firmly in the direction she had chosen.

'The priest would solemnize our relationship. It wouldn't be merely an affair if we received an official blessing from any authorised person, no matter what false god that per-

son represented. It would show we had done what we could in difficult circumstances to satisfy our social consciences.'

Grame laughed, rashly. 'What a hypocrite you sound,' he said indulgently.

Valya turned on him in a rage.

'So you don't want to marry me?'

'I do in a way. But not now. I adore you, but I want to finish what we're doing, here in Britain, before I think of anything else.'

She stepped back, panting. She was getting more out of the scene than Grame was. 'I'm a bride of the state, and three weeks ago you were a mech-rep in a hut.'

'I've come up a long way in three weeks,' he said. He was still not entirely conscious of what was happening. For all he knew, it was something that could be talked away.

'I'll see that you go down as quickly in three days,' she threatened.

Grame looked at her, beginning at last to be worried. There were moments when he had loved her; but these moments had never occurred when she was speaking to him. When she walked undaunted through dangers or sat in beautiful exhaustion by the fire she was a desirable woman; when she ordered him about with a snap in her voice she was expelled instantly from his imagination. He saw her now only as someone who could do him a lot of harm with the Council.

'Valya, think of the state,' he said uneasily. 'You're married to it. You mustn't betray the Council and . . . and all those machines,' he said, laughing, trying to make a joke of it. 'I want to be loyal to my country,' he said, still grinning, 'not go round stealing its wife.'

'You insulting vulgarian,' she said. 'Remember whom you're speaking to.'

‘That’s what I’m trying to do.’

She took a deep breath through her nose. He had often noticed that was a bad sign with women.

‘So this is what happens. I do you the honour of offering to break my vows—for you. Men worth twenty of you have tried to make me love them—I despised them, every one of them. I suppose because they were too good. I didn’t realise I had this loathsome streak in me, that I had a yearning for the mean and brutish and low that could only be satisfied by you.’

‘Any machine would give you ninety per cent for rhetoric,’ Grame said, ‘but I’m not a public meeting.’

‘When you get back I’ll see you’re not allowed into any reputable meeting. If you can be made lower than what you used to be, that’s what I’ll make you.’

Hatred and anger were flooding up to Grame’s head and battering at his self-control. Something had to escape. He laughed.

‘Is this really your idea of how to tempt me to your bed?’ he asked.

She pulled the gun from her belt. ‘Run before I shoot,’ she shouted.

Grame had been about to walk away. Now he stopped.

‘I’m anxious to go, he said, ‘but I don’t like the idea of being shot in the back. I’ll wait till your dramatic instinct cools down.’ He leant against a tree and waited with an air of patience that invited its own destruction.

She fired. She was only six yards from him, but she missed him entirely. A lump of bark sprang from the tree and hit him on the head, so that for a moment of crashing fright he thought he had been shot. He kicked the gun from her hand and she stood looking at her numbed fingers in amazement, until she felt his hands round her throat. He tightened his grip for a moment, then flung her away.

He turned. He wanted to run into the forest until his blood cooled. He remembered he had left the gun on the ground where she might find it again. He looked back. She was lying quite still; the gun was beside her head. He walked back and bent to pick up the gun, looking at her face. She was badly frightened, beautiful, and helpless.

He knelt beside her and put his hands gently on the throat he had nearly crushed. He saw that she was sad and defeated; defeat in her seemed twice as pitiable because she had always been so brave. He leant over her and kissed her, then lay down and slipped an arm under her head. She didn't move at all; she gave not the slightest indication of desire; and his glance wandered up the tree trunk, through the branches and the leaves to the segments of blue sky that floated in and out of view above the rippling leaves.

He lay, looking up, for a long time, not thinking of her, but of all the women he had known. He wondered why she'd been so desperate to have him. Within his experience, one woman was nearly as good as another, and he supposed that women might feel the same about men. He felt that now another man, Hep, for instance, would do as much or as little for her as he would. The flash of tenderness and desire he'd felt when he kissed her was fading away. When he lay down beside her she could have had him, if she'd been a woman with a natural instinct for his feelings. If she had put her arms round him and let him feel the beating of her heart, his own heart would have accelerated; if she had let her full lips rest on his she could have breathed desire into every vein in his body.

She lay motionless, with every muscle tensed, afraid to lose the moment of sympathy that had already been dissipated. He was tired of lying still. He kissed her perfunctorily and sat up, then patted her kindly on the shoulder.

'It's a pity there isn't a sex cubicle in the forest,' he said, trying again to make a joke of the situation.

'Oh, you're so vulgar,' she said, wrenching herself away from him.

'Vulgar?'

'You're always exhibiting your low-grade background—as though you were proud of it. Decent people don't have sex cubicles.'

'What do they have?'

'They have bedrooms.'

'So I ought to have said I wish there was a bedroom in the forest. I wish there was a bedroom in the forest and I hope I never sleep in or out of it with you. Does that sound better? Do you find my sentiments more agreeable for being correctly phrased? If you insist on a particular set of words for every occasion and are offended when you don't get them, why not have the words printed and hand them around before you order people into your virginal bed?'

'To think that I wanted you! You'd make me miserable a thousand times a day.'

'You're going to have a very happy life, without even a hope of having to endure my proximity,' Grame assured her. He regretted the trivial malice of the words before he had finished speaking them. He was beginning to appreciate his escape. When he thought of the emotional danger of sleeping with Valya; and of the gross complications that would have followed, relief lifted him back to a generous happiness. He began to speak cheerfully: proving to her with every word that he was a callous egotist, prepared to mock her display of passion.

'It's the second bullet you've wasted on me,' he said. 'That leaves only three. If you use them all on me, your chance of killing me improves. Couldn't you keep them for more serious occasions?'

'I'll use them as I choose. If you have my gun, will you please give it back to me?'

He gave it to her, quite naturally. When she had pushed

it back in her belt her face became harder and stronger. The emotional situation was entombed under the rock of her mind.

They went back to the settlement together in silence. There was nothing to be communicated.

Chapter Ten

WHEN THEY REACHED the cave Hep was waiting for them. He was in a sullen mood; he looked as though he'd like one of them to say something offensive.

Brown had recovered. He moved forward at once to greet Grame, whom it was obvious that he greatly preferred to his companions.

'You have enjoyed the pleasures of the forest?' he asked obliquely.

'Not entirely,' Grame said shortly. 'There is always the question of the dogs. Why don't all the men of the tribe band together and kill those brutes? If you don't they'll increase until they can't be killed.'

'Only the Goodfellows may kill them,' Brown said patiently. 'It has always been so—and with us that means we hope it always will be so. The dogs are Thay's creatures, and must be endured. Thay has his reasons.'

'Even if they enter the village and destroy the people?'

'At that point all the men who have spears may defend their families. And every man except the priest has a spear. So I am able to live, as a maker of spears. Also, the best flint-pit belongs to me. I have managed to make that part of our tradition,' he said, almost grinning. 'And now I want to become also a maker of wooden shelters—of houses. It will not be easy—to find wood of the right size.'

'You want an axe,' Grame said. He went to his pack and

found the little axe he had carried through the forest. 'An axe like this, but bigger.'

Brown fingered it; felt the weight of the head; went out of the cave and swung it experimentally against a tree.

'What is this heavy black stuff?'

'It's iron. You find it in the ground; melt it over fire; beat it into shape when it's hot.'

Hep laughed. 'Careful, Grame. This man's going to take his tribe right through the iron age and out the other side. If we don't watch out, he'll have a grading machine in the village.'

Grame and Brown worked together with Grame's axe and Brown's flint implements. They talked while they worked, and sometimes stopped work while Grame explained to Brown how to multiply and divide with the use of figures, or the principles of writing, or how to make sure that the house had square corners. They talked all that afternoon and evening, and in the morning they started work again. The village children came to watch, and sometimes carried wood; the bigger children, with flint daggers and hammers, helped to square off the logs. Grame interrupted the work to describe chisels to Brown, and Brown flattened out the points of two daggers and promised that he would make real chisels that night.

Hep spent part of the time wandering cautiously in the woods, looking for innocuous forms of animal life, but occasionally he came and helped with the work on the house. Valya, sulky and inimical, sometimes sat near them with her notebook, recording the children's conversation and watching to see how often they bumped their heads. The village women lurked near, calling angrily to their children and inspecting the strangers. A few of them lost their shyness, like birds tempted by crumbs, and came close enough to join in the talk.

In a day or two Grame began to build a picture of vil-

lage life—a life in which everyone lay idly before the fire all through the winter; found food and fuel in the summer and then rested in the sun; allowed the thought of Thay to interfere with every reasonable activity; and enjoyed the emotional excitement of being terrified by the priest.

Only Brown and one or two of the others, including the operator who had worked on Brown's tooth, had the energy to think of new projects. To the others, tradition was an endearing labour-saving device. They found endless comfort in the thought that what they did had been done before and would be done again for ever. The disadvantages were no more inconvenient than the smoke that filled their caves. Who would think of going without fire in order to avoid smoke? So women allowed themselves to be battered by the improvers; sent their sons to be initiated by a week alone in the murderous forest, and accepted the principle that the old men must make the laws because they had always made the laws.

'They're all very old anyway,' Valya said. 'Even the young ones have a kind of miserable wisdom. They look and behave as if they had discovered the virtue of doing nothing. Perhaps they're right. At home in Africa, generation after generation, we work hard. Parents struggle to improve their children. But are we getting better as a people? Are we an improvement on our great-grandfathers?'

'From you, these are sad thoughts. Has something happened to depress you, Valya?' Hep asked, knowing that it had.

Valya ignored him easily. 'In thirty generations, will our descendants be infinitely better than ourselves—wiser, kinder, happier—working even harder—or will they be like this?' She waved her hand towards the men and women, bald, diminutive, dirty, illiterate, and idle, who lounged vacantly in the sun.

'Working hard is only a negative virtue,' Hep said. 'It keeps us on top of the people who work less hard. The people here don't work, so they will end with someone on top of them. Civilisation is just an impetus to increase knowledge and keep on top.'

'These people don't look as if they cared about being on top.'

'We've translated the idea of being on top into a virtue. Knowledge is a virtue, too, but not here. Qualities that aren't considered to be virtues are not virtues. Tradition is the virtue here—don't make the mistake of having absolute standards, Valya,' Hep said.

'You get seeds in your brain,' Brown said peaceably. 'If you don't let them sprout, you're unhappy. Your people like to let them sprout. Most of my people like to keep the seeds out.'

The priest came to watch the wooden house being built.

'This is not wise,' he said. 'This has never been done before.'

Brown spoke to him with great politeness. 'With six of these,' he said, 'it won't be necessary for young men and women to die in the woods next year. They can live in the village, and our tribe will become larger.'

'I will consult Thay,' the priest said threateningly. 'It may be his wish that our people should not increase. It has been said in the past that there is safety in no numbers. The Yorks have numbers, but they are hated by Thay. Even York-thinkers are hated by Thay.'

'Especially on the night of the full moon,' Brown agreed in a pious voice, looking with hatred at the priest's back.

'Who are the Yorks?' Valya asked.

'They are people.'

'Other people? Another tribe? You know them?'

'Bad people. A long way from here. They are supposed to think it necessary to kill us,' Brown said. He refused at

first to say any more, then suddenly added: 'You may hear of them to-night. It's the full moon. We'll do no more work on the house to-day. I'll make some more spears,' he said in what might have been a significant voice.

Valya was talking to Hep, and Grame took the chance to walk into the woods. He hadn't seen a dog for days, and the forest held far more fascination than fear for him. He liked to walk softly and surprise the small unfamiliar creatures that ventured out of their holes; he liked to look endlessly forward into nothing but the silver and brown and black of the tree-trunks. In the forest, life continued, and looked as if it would continue for ever. The trees drew their force from earth that was endlessly enriched by their own discarded foliage; fifty feet above ground the green leaves drank the water that the roots had sucked from the earth; in the depths of the earth the roots were nourished by the sunshine that the leaves sent spinning down the trunk. When an old tree fell a young tree leapt into the gap.

Grame lay down and stared at the sky, wondering why seeds used trees to reproduce themselves; how long the earth's atmosphere would last after life vanished from the planet; if any atomic explosion could be so gigantic as to destroy all life. He enchanted his senses by thinking again about the trees; a hunger in him that had been denied was wholly satisfied by the forest.

Africa was not only far away, it had ceased entirely to exist. If this desperate country of mad dogs and rudimentary people, of threatening and exquisite forest, was reality, then Africa must be an illusion, and atomic weapons were no more than part of that illusion. There was no reason to worry about the destruction of civilisation, here in Britain, where there was no civilisation to destroy.

He tried to look into his own mind, and discover why he supposed that one reality excluded another. He was part of the question. Had the savage who lay under the trees

destroyed the physicist who had fought his way out of the hut?

He lay face down on the soft leaves, letting the damp smell sink through his nostrils into his brain and exist there for a moment. The hot, clean smells of Africa were forgotten.

Above his head the birds sang and shouted and croaked. He was learning to ignore habitual noises, but now he heard a new insistent sound, a steadier shrieking. He rolled over to listen, and then stood up and ran.

In a hundred paces he came to the source of the shrieking, which was mingled now with the howling of a dog.

In a small clearing with a few stunted thorns and one tree in the centre, a girl was standing, back against the tree, screaming as she tried to ward off with her hands the onslaught of a medium-sized rough-haired dog. Grame jumped towards her, shouting, but before he was within reach the dog had the girl down. From ten feet away Grame dived, and landed head-first on the dog's back, with his hands groping for a grasp on its body. The shock of the fall knocked the light out of his head, and he rolled over blindly, clutching the dog by the ears. It twisted, snapping, and as its jaws tore at the clothing round his chest, his hands found its foreleg. He held it away while it snapped and tore at his wrists. His head cleared and he bent the leg until the dog howled, and then let go. As it lunged at his face he was ready, and caught it round the throat. He began to strangle it as he stood up. When it was already sagging he took the dagger from his belt and stabbed it.

He knelt on the ground, gasping. It was a few seconds before he turned to see the girl he had rescued. She had gone.

He looked with annoyance at his bleeding wrists. It would have been kinder if she had waited to tie them up.

With the help of his teeth, he bandaged each wrist firmly enough to stop the bleeding.

When he went back to the cave, Hep looked at him with interest. 'What happened? Did you meet a giant mouse?'

'I saved a girl from a dog,' Grame said. 'It was worth doing. She'll be grateful. Any kind of friend, even a woman friend, might be useful here.'

Hep helped him to bandage his wrists again. 'So you think women friends are useful. I've told you before you're an unsophisticated type. But if you really think they're useful, why don't you cultivate Valya? She's gunning for you at the moment.'

'She's gunned for me twice already,' Grame said incautiously.

'Twice? So that's what happened that day. And you let her waste another shot on you? I'd have married her first. Now we've only three shots left. Suppose we meet four lions?'

'I didn't ask her to shoot at me,' Grame said moodily.

'You have an insolent expression that says far more than words.'

Valya came in, and they both became excessively silent. She looked at them as though she suspected them of telling dirty stories.

'He's been rescuing a girl,' Hep explained, pointing to Grame's bandaged wrists.

'Oh, did she hurt you much, Grame?' Valya asked. 'What girl?'

'The daughter of a chief,' Hep said maliciously. 'It may lead to one of these little romances.'

'Grame, you haven't——'

'If you think I launched myself at her while the dog was ripping me up, I didn't.'

'Dog?'

She had the situation explained to her.

'I think you've done a very risky and silly thing,' she said. 'Now the girl will hang around you, admiring you, and getting in the way. All the same,' she looked at him calculatingly, 'you do have physical courage to quite a marked degree. In the early phases of civilisation, while we were clearing the continent, you would have been very useful. You have been useful here. When we get back we will try to find something you can do,' she added condescendingly.

'You might get a job in a circus,' Hep said. 'The way this conversation is going, I think it's time I slipped out to speak to Brown.' He left the cave.

Grame turned on Valya. Anger was rushing the normal restraints out of his mind. 'So I would have been useful in the early stages of our civilisation,' he mimicked her. 'You're only a grading machine on legs. Because a man talks about sex cubicles you grade him as mentally vulgar. Because he isn't a coward you mark him down as having physical courage and nothing else. I've got a mind. I can think. I can learn. I've learnt a lot more in my life than you have. I'm learning more about these people than you are. There's a chance I've learnt enough to fly the Amphibian back, which is more than you can ever do. I'm your way out of Britain, and if I don't choose to take you you'll stay here until your bones become an interesting anthropological study.'

Valya listened to him like a medical student observing diseases of the brain. 'So you fancy you're in charge of this expedition. You're as bad in your own way as Berrn was.'

'I'm not in charge of the expedition. I'm in charge of myself.'

'So you will refuse to obey me if I give an order?'

'When you are in a reasonable mood you don't give orders. You make suggestions and the three of us discuss

them. When I'm in a reasonable mood, I accept suggestions.'

Brown's wife and children took shape in the obscurity at the back of the cave. The woman was adding wood to the fire, and light from the new flames shuddered through the gloom.

Brown came in, and Hep with him.

'He says it's a good night to stay at home with the door up,' Hep said, nodding towards Brown, who was already dragging the wooden barrier into place by the entrance. 'I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation,' Hep said. 'I'd like to add one thing to it, if it was the kind of conversation it looked. We were held together on the way here. Don't spring apart too violently now that we live in safety.'

Brown looked up at the last word. 'This is not a night of safety,' he said. 'It's the full moon. The night of the I-Spy men. We'll eat now, and sleep while we can.'

They sat together round the cooking-pot; the silent wife and children; Valya and Grame, hating each other; Hep, alternating between malice and anxiety; Brown, talking always to Grame, willing to explain to him what he would not discuss with Valya, and so taking the shortest road to her aversion.

'The I-Spy men are a small cause of fear,' he said to Grame. 'On the night of the full moon they are allowed to Spy. But they do not always choose. It can end in harmless nothing. They are very secret, so they have pleasure. No one knows who they are, but everyone supposes they know. I think they are always priest's men. It is the one night when a man's cave may be invaded without permission. It is very exciting for everyone. Often, as I say, it's nothing more.'

'But to-night we are here,' Grame said, scowling. 'So it will be more exciting.'

'You are still supposed to be powerful,' Brown murmured.

'Are you sorry you wasted these two bullets, Valya?' Hep asked.

'When do they come?' Valya asked.

'When the moon is past its height. It is an old custom. It has always been so.' He looked satirically at his wife, who was busy kneading a lump of clay into the shape of a jug. 'You see, we are all busy and harmless to-night. In most caves the women work with clay, or sew the skins together into clothes, or even prepare food for the next day. But now I think I will sleep. Even although you are powerful, we may still be visited.'

Hep and Grame talked quietly while Brown and his family slept. Valya sat, peering at her notebook in the pink waves of firelight.

'Sound conclusions?' Hep asked.

'Oh, yes, I think so. I have a theory that covers most of the apparent contradictions in the British character. They are not exactly primitives, you see, but most of them are just as stupid as if they were. It's because the floors of the caves are so rough.'

'The people are stupid because the caves haven't got smooth floors?' Grame asked in astonishment.

'Yes. I'm perfectly serious. I've thought about it a lot. The children are always falling down and bumping their heads. In the end this affects their reasoning powers—and of course it cramps their personalities for ever. Most of the personality is carried in the frontal areas—you know that. People like Brown are probably a little more intelligent because they were surer-footed in childhood and didn't fall so much.'

'How did he get to be sure-footed?' Hep asked.

'I suppose he was born that way.'

'But couldn't he just as easily have been born with a higher intelligence than the rest?' Grame asked.

'Oh, Grame, you simply don't understand. I'm trying

to formulate a theory that will explain native stupidity and lack of enterprise. If there are exceptions to this stupidity, I have to be honest and allow for them, but so far as the general theory goes, they are not important.'

'I thought the exceptions were important,' Grame said obstinately. 'I thought they were the men who made the discoveries for the mass of the people to assimilate. I know the discoveries are wasted if they are made too soon—but nothing happens at all unless the exceptionally gifted people are there when the time comes.'

'Don't let's have any adolescent political arguments,' Valya begged him.

'I think Brown is more intelligent because he was born with a better brain', Grame said firmly.

'Grame, I believe you've got it! You've given me the clue. He's more intelligent because he was born with a thicker skull. He has stronger bones—that's why his head measurements are so good—so although he probably fell as much as the others in his infancy, it affected him less. Now, if we could make the mothers give their children more calcium, they'd probably all develop thicker skulls. If only we could educate the mothers to feed their children properly! But these tiny wild cows will never give enough milk,' she said sadly.

'You'd better begin on the cows and teach them how to feed the calves properly,' Hep said. 'There's a big job in front of you, Valya, before you have all the British brains pulsating inside thick skulls. Your first job is to undo all the mutative changes. Or hasn't it occurred to you that these have been taking place? Most of the recognisable creatures are the wrong size, or have developed spiral teeth or poisoned whiskers or something else untypical and disagreeable. Don't over-simplify the problem of the human beings, or fancy that you can resolve all their difficulties by putting carpets down in the caves. This is the

kind of country where quite a lot of the birds have been turning back into lizards, lately.'

'Hep, do you mean it?' Valya asked excitedly.

'Someone ought to put you through a laughing machine,' Hep said gloomily. 'I'm going to sleep. I'll have to trust to luck that I don't wake up as a giraffe.' He turned his back on them and lay down.

'He's always pretending that everything is funny,' Valya said discontentedly. 'He can't see the truth through his cynicism.'

'Everyone looks at the truth from different positions,' Grame suggested. 'So how could it seem the same to different people?'

'It's another thing you don't understand, Grame,' Valya said wearily. 'I've been trained to study everything with absolute honesty. What I see is the real truth. I don't hide everything beneath layers of cynicism or sentiment. People like you and Hep don't understand honesty. I sometimes feel that you don't believe there is any truth.'

'I'm going to sleep too,' Grame said. 'I envy you your certainty.'

Later that night Grame was wakened by the shrieking chant of the I-Spy men. He wished that he hadn't returned the gun to Valya. He moved to wake Brown and Hep, but they were not sleeping, and they answered him at once.

'We are patient,' Brown whispered to him, 'and guilty of nothing.'

The chant of I-Spy wavered and fell like a siren, and then came towards them so rapidly that it seemed this cave was the true objective. The door went down, and the long feathers and painted mask bent into the cave, followed by the small body of a man. Two more head-dresses, held up by small men, followed, and the cave was filled with the shouts of I-Spy, and the sound of rhythmical stamping on the floor.

The three travellers stood up. Brown put wood on the fire, woke his wife from her pretended sleep, then watched, saying nothing, while his children were dragged from their couches.

'I-Spy a friend of the Yorks,' the first man shouted, and the other two echoed him. Brown watched them, but didn't move. 'Tell us if your father and mother like the Yorks,' the I-Spy men shouted at the children, who began instantly to gabble, 'Father and mother hate Yorks, father and mother hate Yorks.' This they said faster and faster until they lost their way and mumbled: 'Yorks, father mother hate, hate mother father hate yorks father hate mother hate father yorks,' until not much was left in their heads but the knowledge they had to hate something when they heard the cry of I-Spy. The younger child faltered after two minutes, and would have ceased his recital if Brown hadn't picked him up by the ears and shaken him until he bellowed 'Hate Yorks father.'

The I-Spy men turned away from the children, and one of them raised his hand and pointed at Grame. 'I-Spy,' he began.

'And what do you spy?' Grame asked menacingly, picking up the axe.

The man looked Grame over carefully. 'I spy an honoured friend,' he snarled, and stamped ceremonially to the fire.

'I-Spy York symbols on the pottery,' he said. Brown's wife, who was slightly skilled in the decoration of clay, and had ornamented the family pots with the rude outlines of leaves and flowers, put her forehead humbly to the ground. One I-Spy man picked up the jug she had been working on, and held it out for the inspection of his fellows. They shouted affirmation, and he crushed the soft clay between his hands. Then they walked round the cave, smashing all the bowls or pitchers they could see.

When they had gone Brown sighed and swore. 'It's nothing,' he said, 'nothing. There's plenty of clay. Don't decorate the next lot. We're lucky they didn't choose to think the children had York-shaped heads. But they're bad to-night. Listen. They've got someone.'

The shouts of I-Spy were rising hysterically, and a score of new voices had joined in the cry. Grame went to the mouth of the cave, and saw black figures running across the moonlit clearing like starlings on the homeward flight.

Brown and Hep joined him, and they went out.

The operator who had cured Brown's tooth stood in a ring of angry people.

'I-Spy a man who doesn't want to fight the Yorks,' they shouted.

'But none of them do want to fight the Yorks,' Brown whispered to Grame. 'It's never admitted, but it's the truth about all of us.'

'I-Spy a man who uses York flints.'

'They're better,' the operator said hopelessly.

'Ah,' the crowd moaned in satisfaction. 'He admits his guilt.'

'He goes in the woods alone. He goes to talk to a Yorkist,' another cried.

'I-Spy a traitor who talks to Yorkists,' the crowd bel-
lowed fervently.

An old man pushed his way to the front.

'What plans did you make with the Yorkist, traitor?' he demanded.

'We talked about teeth,' the operator said sullenly. He had lowered his head and was nodding stiffly, like a ram preparing to butt the advancing butcher. 'We talked about nothing you would understand. I showed him the flints I use, he showed me a double flint with crossed blades that grip.'

'Traitor! Destroyer! I-Spy a man who has killed five.'

'Who has saved twelve,' Brown muttered. He looked up at the moon and began to edge away from the crowd, touching Grame and Hep lightly, so that they should follow him.

'What shall we do with him?' the I-Spy men asked.

'Let him go to the dogs,' the audience shouted. 'Let him go to the dogs unarmed!' They pulled off his cloak, and pushed and shuffled him out of the clearing into the woods, shouting. 'I Spy a traitor. Let the dogs spy him too.'

Brown went back to his cave, and lay down on his couch without speaking. Hours later Grame saw him rise, a shadow. 'Don't let them in, don't let them know I've gone,' he whispered to Grame. He went out, carrying a bundle, two spears, and a sheepskin cloak.

Grame dropped back into a dim, unsatisfactory sleep. When he woke in the morning Brown was moving noisily about the cave.

'You have seen how we honour our wise men,' he said sourly to Grame. 'Now we go on with the building of the house.'

Chapter Eleven

THEY FOUND THAT one of the half-completed walls of the house had been smashed by some excited enemy. Grame was angry. Brown smiled, although he didn't look amused.

'Our people see annihilation as a beast the size of the whole world. Its jaws are opened wide, waiting for us. Every step forward leads into the beast's jaws. So the people's greatest hope is to remain for ever where they are to-day. We must make patience grow in us, as hard and sharp as flint. If we are angry, they will fight us. If we continue to do what we mean to do, in the end they may accept it, although this is not certain. I am sorry that the priest is my enemy. He is the keeper of tradition, and sometimes he accepts a new idea and disguises it as an old one. We thought he had accepted the work of the operator on teeth, but, as you saw last night, he had not. The priest has damaged his own authority. The next man who is maddened by pain will not thank him.'

A man who wore an apologetic smile like a too-conspicuous badge of innocence, strolled towards them; exchanged a few furtive words with Brown; and wandered aimlessly away. Brown went back to the cave and brought out two new spears, which he laid close to his hand.

'You will keep the little axe within reach,' he suggested to Grame. 'The I-Spy men did not like that little axe. I wish I could find this hard black stuff in Britain.'

Grame described in detail the appearance of iron ore.

‘There is some of this rock, I think, a few marches beyond the bright green stuff.’

‘What bright green stuff?’

‘You have seen the stones round my wife’s neck?’

‘No,’ Grame said. He looked for Valya, vaguely supposing that she might have been more likely to notice female ornaments, but she wasn’t within sight. Nor was she with Hep, who now came to help them with the building of the house.

‘And nearby,’ Brown said, ‘there is the bright, black stone that burns.’

Hep stared. ‘Oh, is there? That’s very interesting. Stone Not liquid. You’ve never seen any liquid that burns?’

‘Never.’

‘It doesn’t mean there isn’t any oil in this country. Not positively,’ Hep said to Grame. ‘But I wonder about the black stone. I’ve seen something in a museum. Our ancestors had this black stuff. Coal, that’s what it’s called. I wonder if the Council would be interested in coal? We might be able to release electricity for other purposes, if we’d something else for melting iron. Is there much of this black stuff, Brown?’

‘Yes,’ Brown said. ‘It is far away. Twelve, sixteen days’ march. I don’t know.’

‘But you’ve seen it?’

Brown nodded.

Grame swung the axe above his head and brought it down on a log, splitting it neatly in two.

‘How did you come to go so far?’ he asked.

‘I am building this house for many reasons, Grame. One of the reasons is that long ago I had no cave. When I was a boy, or nearly a man, I had a girl—who was nearly a woman. We didn’t want to go to the woods, and like many others we hid together in the long grass, and went back to out fathers’ caves in the night. The priest—it was another

priest, then—found us, and we were sent to the woods. We fought the dogs, but the girl died. Then I didn't want to go back to my father's cave. I went on, away from my own people. For—oh—a spring and a summer and a winter I stayed in the woods. I found flints and made spears and hunted. Some time in the hot weather I came to a great hole in the ground, a hole as deep as a mountain, and near it were black hills. Not big hills, but many of them. I made my fire, using the black stone to shelter it from the wind, and the stone burned more fiercely than the wood. Then I went to the city, and to the place of the bright green stuff.'

'The city?' Grame asked eagerly.

'Did I say city? No one talks of the city. I was mad, I think, with being so long alone. I supposed there was a city, but there was not. There was certainly the black stone and the bright green stuff. Then for a winter I lived with the Yorks. They are a very brave people, but they live in fear that we will attack them. They have better caves than ours, and their priest allows them to kill the dogs.'

'Brown, tell me about the city?' Grame said.

'I have told you the city was only in my head,' Brown said evasively.

'Why didn't you stay with the Yorks?'

'I didn't want to live always as a stranger. Perhaps you will also feel this, Grame, and leave us. I left the Yorks and came back here. There was this new priest, and at first he wasn't my enemy. I found another woman, and this time I hid my spears and dagger in the woods before I was driven out with her. When the dogs attacked us, I was able to kill them, so we came back, and had the first cave. Then I thought I didn't want to be a hunter any more, so I made spears.'

'And now you make houses,' Hep observed.

'If Thay agrees to these,' Brown said. 'And Thay's 'priest also,' he added more truculently.

‘How powerful is the priest, Brown?’ Grame asked.

‘All knowledge of Thay comes through the priest. All knowledge of what has been done before also comes from the priest. One priest tells the next before he dies. So we have I-Spy men and no houses and the youth ordeal for women and very few potatoes. The priest is sacred. The knowledge he dispenses is also sacred. Many stupidities are sacred, because they were passed from the first people, the two that Thay allowed to escape.’

‘Two?’

‘There are different stories,’ Brown said vaguely. ‘Nothing about Thay is clear. He is not to be thought about, but accepted.’

‘Is there a heaven?’ Hep asked.

‘Heaven?’

‘A place you go to when you die, as a reward for living a good life. Everything there is perfect.’

‘There is no heaven in Britain,’ Brown said.

‘I thought all primitive tribes had one promised to them by their priests,’ Hep said.

‘In your Africa you have a heaven there?’

‘We know too much,’ Grame explained. ‘We know, as the primitives didn’t, that space is infinite, and that there is nothing there but the Noble Abstraction. When we die we are burnt and our vital particles are released to join the Noble Abstraction.’

‘Abstraction? Infinite?’ Brown asked. He already knew the meaning of primitive. It was a word he had often heard from his guests. They explained the new words, and he added them at once to his growing vocabulary. He seemed to grasp something of the meaning of the Noble Abstraction, but he refused to accept their idea of the vital particle.

‘I think your vital particle could not rise,’ he protested. ‘The vital particle in a man is that part of him that enters his children. This is the thread that people follow. It con-

ceals itself in each one of us, and uses us so that it may continue for ever. No man can endure the thought of the thread's breaking.'

'If they have no heaven they can scarcely have a hell,' Hep said. 'Hell is a place of torture that evil people enter after death.'

'There is nothing after death—only perhaps the thread that now uses the bodies of the children.'

'No heaven, no hell, no Noble Abstraction, no vital particle. Only a thread that sometimes winds on, and a Thay that has to be feared monotonously,' Hep said. 'That might be why your people take things so easy. Personally, I've always regretted that our forefathers cut heaven away from the Noble Abstraction's feet. But at least the Noble Abstraction is an idea. I like life to contain cause for alarm and hope of victory—it makes existence an interesting spiral instead of a dropped perpendicular. I'll let you explain dropped perpendiculars, Grame. Your delight in the dissemination of knowledge is one of the things that keep you on the spiral.'

Grame had already begun to draw a diagram on the ground when the priest, followed by two squat, strong men, came across the clearing towards them.

Grame stood up, dangling the axe in his hand.

The priest stopped beside them, while his followers looked at Grame in consternation.

'Thay has said that there has never been a wooden dwelling and must never be a wooden dwelling,' the priest announced.

'I am the messenger of Thay and I bring no such message,' Grame said.

The priest ignored him. He spoke exclusively to Brown.

'Thay has said that this wooden dwelling should be pulled down.'

‘Then let Thay’s priest come and do this,’ Grame suggested viciously.

The priest waved his hand, and the two followers, their shoulders dragged down by the weight of their long arms, slouched towards the house. Grame watched them, calculating their fighting ability. They were strong, but at least fourteen inches shorter than himself. They both carried spears. He thought he could manage them alone, without using the axe, and he had Hep with him. It would be better for Brown if he wasn’t forced to join in the fight.

Grame waited until the first of the two touched the wall of the house. Then he stepped forward, picked the man up, and threw him at his companion. They fell with a crash. The man underneath wriggled free, and Hep put his foot on the other man’s throat and held him down.

Grame picked up their spears and hurled them as far as he could towards the forest.

The second man lumbered in to attack. Grame, who was not only taller, but at least two stone heavier, knocked him aside contemptuously and then jumped on him, with his knees on the man’s chest.

‘Shall I kill this man?’ he asked the priest.

‘It is Thay’s will that you should let him live.’

‘If he lives, it is not by Thay’s will, but by mine. If it is Thay’s will that the wooden house shall stand, then it may be mine that the man shall live.’

‘It is Thay’s will that in order to stop the death of this man, the house shall stand.’

Grame stood up, pulled the man to his feet, and sent him cannoning towards the priest.

‘So it is by the will of Thay that the man has been spared,’ the priest said smoothly. ‘The elderly lawyers meet to-night,’ he said venomously to Brown. ‘The woman must be there. And these two men also.’

They watched him go, bent forward, his black cape

floating as he scurried forward to advance his plots. Grame had a hazy vision of him creeping from one age to another, out of pre-history through the generations into the future; prejudiced, conspiring, murderous; holding men by a twist of the barb in their minds. Grame's muscles stiffened in surrender to hatred.

'I'll get my hands on that man,' he promised.

'It would not be the will of Thay that his priest should be killed,' Brown said uncertainly. He smiled at Grame. 'The voice of Thay would speak more quietly if you stayed here, Grame. You are strong, and never afraid. And you too, Hep,' he added politely.

'Valya wouldn't like to stay,' Hep said. 'She's burning to leave.'

'Oh, yes, the woman,' Brown agreed absently. He began to chip at the wood again. 'The meeting of the elderly lawyers may end in death for someone,' he said abruptly. 'A belief in heaven might reduce the cause for alarm—but you will be happy, to join your noble abstraction?'

'Maybe. But for the present, I'd just as soon go on with the building of the house,' Hep said, grinning. 'Here's Valya now—and she looks like trouble.'

Grame watched Valya hurrying towards them, admiring her long, determined, easy stride that made her look as though she trod a different earth from the waddling, lazy, tribeswomen. When she came closer he saw from her face that her mind also inhabited a different region. She was in a state of noble excitement that would almost certainly lead to trouble for them all.

'There's a boy,' she said. 'He's very ill. I'm going to give him the drops, and I want you both to help.' She went into the cave.

'The drops?' Brown asked.

'Our universal anti-bacterial treatment,' Hep explained.

‘They kill off every kind of germ. The patient is left totally empty. His blood stream is practically a vacuum until new bacteria rush in. Then if he can’t get more drops in time he’s finished. He’s just a battlefield. The new bacteria fight it out in his body until it disintegrates. But they’re very wonderful drops—guaranteed to cure everything but death. You haven’t got time to explain bacteria now, Grame. Here’s Valya. We’d better follow her and be in at the death of whoever’s going to die.’

Valya came out of the cave with the medicine phial. She didn’t stop to speak, and they followed her to the other end of the village, where the women and a few men stood in muttering groups.

‘She mustn’t go in,’ Brown said to Grame. ‘Make her wait.’

‘You’re not to go in the cave, Valya, until Brown asks if you may,’ Grame said. Valya, checked in mid-emotion, was indignant. She walked on angrily, but Grame caught her wrist. ‘Accept a reasonable suggestion,’ he begged. She hesitated, and he let go her hand.

‘That’s a good girl,’ Hep said approvingly. ‘Even five minutes longer on this planet may be worth having, for all I know. Valya, I think it’s too dangerous a thing to practise kill-or-cure methods on one of these people.’

Brown went to the entrance of the cave and called, waiting until he heard an answering wail that must have been an invitation, for he went into the cave. The muttering groups were studying the strangers, and muttering now on a more resentful note.

Brown came out. ‘The boy is ill,’ he said shortly to Grame. ‘I think he must die. The woman says you may go in if you mean to help her son. I think that you can’t help him and that you may put yourselves in danger.’

‘Come on,’ Valya said. ‘How do you know we can’t help him?’

Grame followed her into the cave. A boy of about fourteen lay on a grass couch by the smoking fire, with a sheepskin cover laid over him. He was flushed, and his eyes looked as though they were examining another dimension. Grame, who knew nothing about illness, was reminded uncomfortably of Thorp. He put out his hand and felt the burning forehead. He turned back the sheepskin covering and watched the boy's chest heaving desperately, like the surge and fall of boiling metal. He felt the flat, hard stomach and the muscles of the thighs, rigid, like knotted wood.

'The strangers will save my son,' the woman sighed.

Grame turned to Valya. 'He's like Thorp,' he said. 'I think we should leave him alone.'

'Leave him alone when there's a chance, the slightest chance, that we might help him?' She was outraged.

'I think that whatever we do, he'll die. Then they'll say that if we'd left him alone he'd have lived.'

'You're only quoting Brown. You're as much of a coward as he is. If you're unwilling to take the risk of saving this boy's life, what do you suggest we do now? I suppose you have a reasonable suggestion that we can discuss while he dies,' she said contemptuously.

'Do nothing. Tell them to pray to Thay. Then if he dies Thay can take the blame.'

'I'm going to give him the drops,' Valya said.

'Valya, think of Thorp. This boy's like him. It's not a fever that responds to our medicine.'

'I'll give him the drops,' Valya said. 'Tell them that we want light.'

A woman took a burning stick from the fire, and held it high so that the shadows rolled down the mother's face in front of her tears, and the other faces reeled in and out of red light with the swaying of the torch.

'Lift his head, Grame,' Valya said.

He slipped his arm under the boy's shoulders and raised him. Valya bent over the boy. At first she couldn't open his jaws, but with Grame's help she managed to part the teeth enough to get the drops into his mouth. Then Grame lowered the head again. Valya still bent over him. A pendant with a green, transparent stone slipped out of her shirt and swung over the boy like a pendulum, so that a patch of shadow moved backwards and forwards across his face. She tucked the pendant back in her shirt, and remained kneeling beside the boy, gently massaging his stomach while he groaned.

'I think it's his appendix,' she said to Grame. 'I wish we could operate.'

'I'm glad we can't,' he said with fervour.

'I wonder,' she said. 'I've always thought there's nothing in surgery but common sense and cleanliness. We'd have to know where the appendix is—but we do know. At least I do. Suppose we boiled up our sharpest knives, and some needles. We could sterilise our clothes somehow with steam.' She was beginning to sound ecstatic. The boy himself was receding from her thoughts: his illness was now only an obstacle that had to be overcome in her struggle towards a new achievement.

'It's a nice dream,' Grame said, yawning, not from boredom, but from a mixture of exhaustion and fear. 'Last night was bad. None of us slept very much. Sleeplessness gives you ideas, like drink. If you could sleep for just an hour, you wouldn't think of sticking knives, even clean knives, into that boy.'

Hep came into the cave while Grame was speaking. 'Don't forget the meeting with the elders,' he whispered. 'There's no time for sleeping now.'

Valya pulled the knife from her belt. 'Take this,' she said, tossing it at Grame, 'and yours, too. Put them both in water and boil them. Get two shirts, put them in a dry

clean pot, put it on the fire and keep it there until the shirts are not quite burnt.'

Grame stood still. 'I won't do it,' he whispered, while the mother leant forward, trying to understand what he said. 'It's murder for him and suicide for us. He's going to die. Let him do it in his own way without slashing him up with knives.'

'I'm the leader of this expedition, Grame. You will do it,' Valya breathed.

Grame took the knives and went out of the cave. Hep followed him. 'I think I heard her say only two shirts,' Hep said. 'Does that mean I'm not to be one of the surgeons? Have I time to run? But if I run alone I'll only die in the forest alone. Would it be right to give her a rabbit punch?'

'You'd better stay with her,' Grame said. He left Hep and went back to Brown's cave.

He told Brown's wife to fill the pot with water. As she bent over it, he saw the firelight shining in green drops round her neck. The stones she wore looked like a necklace of crude green glass. He remembered that the Britons didn't know how to make glass, but he didn't feel like discussing jewellery. He watched the pot on the fire, and when the water surged up its sides he dropped the knives in, slowly. Then he went back to the other cave to look at the boy again.

'You've brought the things?' Valya asked.

'Not ready yet,' he said.

The boy began to mutter, and they bent over him.

'The city,' the boy whispered. 'Mother, mother, I want to go to the city.'

The mother went to the boy. Valya moved away, and Grame left the cave.

'The boy's talking of a city,' he said to Brown, who stared at him with the sad bewilderment of the man whose thoughts have been forced out to the edge of the universe,

and, finding nothing there, have fallen back to the restricted point of light in which he lives.

‘What city?’ Grame said.

‘All the children sometimes want to go to the city. It’s just a thing children talk about.’

‘Is it the city that you went to?’

‘I told you I’m not sure that I went to a city. I was mad.’

‘Has anyone else been to the city?’

‘Everyone knows of it, and of someone’s who’s been there. But the someone is always dead or not yet born.’

‘Unless the someone is you,’ Grame said.

‘I told you of some things I saw in the forest. Black rock, shining green stone. I’m not sure of the city.’

‘But it exists?’

‘It may exist. My grandfather had a friend whose father knew it well. Listen, I think the boy is dying now.’

They went back into the cave, and looked over the heads of the women at the boy. Blood was coming from his lips.

‘Oh, Thay, we fear you and we fear death,’ the women moaned.

Grame went outside and pushed his way through the people who were now drawing nearer to the mouth of the cave, as if death was pulling them in on its line. He walked across the clearing to Brown’s cave. Brown’s wife was not there. She had probably joined the other women.

He took the pot from the fire, and stood over it, waiting for the water to cool. There were a few minutes that he wanted to waste. When the water was cool enough, he plunged his hand in and pulled out the hot knives. He dried them slowly. He was sorry about the boy, but he didn’t know him as he knew himself and Valya and Hep. Before he left the cave he packed his few possessions and some essential equipment into his shoulder bag. The only thing he could see that might be of use was the small box of dynamite. He put it on top of the bag.

On the way back across the clearing he met Valya. Her face was radiant, and, at the same time, intensely serious.

'Grame, is everything ready? This is the test of my life. If we save him I'll feel that everything's been worth while.'

Grame walked on with her. 'He's dead,' he said sourly. He didn't know if it was yet quite true, but he was willing to tell any lie that might stop her.

'Dead? I don't believe you. Have you got them? Give them to me.'

She snatched the knives and ran to the other cave, while Grame followed slowly, wondering about madness. It was probably the result of her unnatural education.

There was a thick crowd now by the other cave. Valya found difficulty in pushing through. Grame hurried, thrusting people aside, and caught up with Valya as she reached the cave. He heard what might have been a mother's farewell scream, then nothing. 'Dead,' he repeated hopefully.

'Poisoned,' said a voice at his elbow. 'Poisoned by the strangers' drink.' Grame looked round into the accusing faces that grew everywhere, like a spreading creeper. Women came from the cave, muttering softly. The word poison floated in the air in overlapping fragments and settled on their shoulders like thistledown. The crowd moved imperceptibly away, leaving Grame and Hep and Valya standing alone, listening to the receding whispers.

'Get back to our cave and pack your things,' Grame said quietly. 'We'll have to move, soon.'

'Move.' Hep asked. 'Where?'

'To the city, I suppose,' Grame said violently.

They looked at Valya, waiting. She hadn't been listening. When she spoke it seemed she hadn't heard anything, not even the threatening whispers, since the boy died.

'We might have saved him,' she said sadly. 'I'm sure it was appendicitis.'

Grame took her by the hand and tried to propel her forward.

'At least we'll be able to see the funeral,' she said drearily.

'So long as we're in a position to do so,' Hep said.

She began to struggle. 'We should go back and observe their customs with the dead.'

'Later, Valya,' Hep said. 'Maybe they turn his face to the east, drink and sing around the deathbed, put mud on their faces. They have customs, and they will go on. Let's get someone else to tell us afterwards. If no one tells us and we ever get back home, we can invent something so implausible that it will be put in the anthropology course instantly.'

'One of us should go back,' Valya said. 'It must be me.'

'Not you, Valya. You gave the drops. You heard what they were whispering?' Grame said patiently.

She began to tremble. 'Let me go. Let me go.'

'Stop it. I tell you that you can't go near there,' Grame said. He and Hep tried to hustle her on. Grame put a hand on her back and felt the shuddering of her flesh.

'I'll go,' he said abruptly. 'It would be better for me to go. I've packed my bag. You and Hep get ready.'

He went back. The people were waiting in a straggling line outside the cave. The priest was inside, shouting.

'Now we know what Thay can do. Let us fear Thay.'

'We fear Thay,' the women cried.

'For yourselves and for your children.'

'For ourselves and for our children.'

'Enter then, and kneel to Thay the destroyer.'

Grame walked in with the first of the others, and stood back in the shadows near the entrance.

A woman knelt by the dead boy. The priest took one of

the lifeless hands and laid it on her forehead. 'I fear Thay,' she screamed, and stood up, covering her eyes. Another woman took her place.

When they had all endured the hand and cringed in submission the priest spoke again.

'Let us fear the boy has been poisoned by the strange woman,' he said, and the people took up the cry with relief.

'Let us fear that this woman once before attempted to destroy life. For she crept unasked into the cave of Lommas, and there attempted to destroy his wife and children. Let us fear that when the elderly lawyers meet to-night they will decree this woman's death.'

'Let us fear,' the women cried rapturously.

'And now the hole must be dug in the ground, deeper than any dog may reach. The body of the boy will lie there forever, part of the earth that made him.'

Grame left the cave very quietly. If they noticed him, they gave no sign. The men who lingered outside let him pass.

In their own cave Hep was putting the last of the equipment in the bags. Valya sat staring grimly into the fire. She roused herself a little when she saw Grame.

'What did they do?' she asked listlessly.

He described the ceremony.

'And that was all?' Hep asked suspiciously.

'There was a sequel,' Grame admitted. 'They're arranging to have Valya condemned to death at this meeting to-night. And us as well, I suppose.'

Valya roused herself at once. 'We have the gun,' she said, in something like her usual brisk voice.

'What about slipping away now and saving ammunition?' Hep suggested.

Grame went to the entrance of the cave and looked out. Thirty, or perhaps thirty-five, men were lounging idly

around the cave, leaning on their spears. He called Hep and Valya, and they stood, calculating.

‘We might get through,’ Valya said with a sigh. ‘But I don’t think all of us would get through,’ she added honestly. ‘And how do we know the lawyers won’t judge us fairly. I think we should wait.’

‘So do I,’ Hep said. ‘I might be the one who didn’t get through.’

Brown appeared, walking unconcernedly through the armed men.

‘You wish to eat?’ he asked politely. He ignored the full packs that lay on the floor. He went to the cooking-pot and put it on the fire.

‘When the time comes, we’ll go to the meeting together,’ he said.

Chapter Twelve

WHEN THEY HAD eaten, the three travellers stood by the mouth of Brown's cave and watched the villagers crossing the clearing with the increased speed of a river as it approaches a waterfall.

'Do you sense a friendly feeling?' Valya asked anxiously.

Hep sighed. 'Make a joke, just once, Valya,' he begged. 'Or scream, or run away, or faint. But stop uttering idiotic remarks that are meant to sound like serious propositions. We do not sense a friendly feeling. We sense that without some brown man's magic we are very soon going to look as though we had been mashed with a flint spoon. So give me the gun, because it's killing magic that we need, and your aim's not good enough.'

'I won't give you the gun,' Valya said. 'It may not be needed. The beautiful girl Grame rescued may be very important—perhaps she'll step forward and save us all,' she said maliciously.

'The girl if she turned up would be on our side. And Brown. That makes two. There are about one hundred and seventy—or it might be two hundred—adults in this community. I don't know how many of them are really fighting mad,' Grame said.

'Brown may have two or three friends,' Hep suggested. 'That will leave only a hundred and ninety-seven against us. And I think they will be against us. The priest would be very happy if he saw our skins pegged out to dry and his word carries nearly all the weight there is. I say: Get ready

to run for it. Everything's packed. We should take the bags with us to the meeting. If we get a chance to run before the meeting begins, then let's run.'

Brown, who had been talking to one of the men who guarded the cave, came towards them unhurriedly.

'They want to come now and force you to the meeting,' he said. 'I think it would be better if you walked alone. I have arranged that you should do this, and that they should follow thirty paces behind. But this means that if you want to leave us you must not do so without first going to the meeting-place. Do you agree, Grame?'

Grame picked up his bag. 'Tell them that if anyone tries to drive me about with the point of a spear I'll break his back and throw him in a tree for the birds to eat. Tell them that for their own safety they'd better not stir a foot until I am forty paces ahead. Tell them that I agree to nothing.'

'Yes,' Brown said doubtfully. He went back and spoke to the men again, then turned round and waited.

'We're off then,' Grame said, and stepped forward briskly. The other two followed. Brown joined them, and walked by Grame's side.

'The elderly lawyers are waiting,' he said. 'You can't become one of them until your grandchildren are fully grown. May I not survive,' he added piously. 'You have a plan, Grame?'

'I don't know how many are against us. I don't know what your elders will say.'

'Almost everyone is against you. They don't like strangers here. I don't know why. Most of them have never met a stranger before. I know one or two who have come across Yorks in the woods, but these are not the people who are most against you. There are two voices, you see. There is the priest's voice, and mine. When they are not excited they will listen to me. When they are excited, only the

priest's voice is heard. And the priest can very easily excite them,' he added sadly. 'Are you afraid, Grame? What will you do?'

'I will try not to kill any of your people,' Grame said. He didn't want to discourage Brown by telling him he had no idea what he would do, except that somehow he would fight his way out.

They were nearly in the middle of the clearing now. A crowd of about two hundred people, counting the adolescents and some naked children, had assembled around a great fire. The scene flashed into Grame's head and opened there into a flower, with the flames at its heart, and the inner ring of firelit faces as the petals. Beyond the brilliant centre the faces were ash-green in the dead light of the moon. Then the faces moved, the flower vanished, and he saw only enemies who wanted his life.

The elders sat around the fire. The others walked slowly in a circle; met briefly in dissolving groups; stood staring for a moment at the flames; rocked from one foot to the other like elephants; whispered freely, so that although no one talked aloud there was a steady rustling, like dead leaves being lifted by a small wind.

The priest stood by the fire; bony, emphatic, exalted by the fury of his convictions. In a row behind him sat the elders, some palsied, some dribbling, and all toothless. One of these old men raised his voice to a trembling height.

'Are the accused present?' he asked.

'Yes,' the crowd muttered.

'Let them stand forward with us.'

'We will stand here,' Grame said loudly, 'unless the people beside us move to the other side of the fire.'

'What was that?' the old man croaked, bending so far forward in his effort to hear that he almost fell head-first into the fire.

Grame shouted what he had to say. 'I will not talk, I

will not listen, I will not remain here with enemies at my back,' he added clearly.

'Tell the people to move, then,' the old man said querulously, and there was a shuffle of hard, bare feet on the grass. Then Grame and Valya and Hep moved a few paces forward, so that they stood alone facing the elders, although Brown was near Grame on his right.

'The President will speak,' the first old man whined.

A very old man, whose bottom jaw shook continuously, tried to get on his feet, but collapsed almost immediately. The two on either side of him, one purple-faced and the other pin-legged, put their hands round his shoulders and hoisted him to his feet, where he stood swaying and clutching at the air for support.

'Drawn to our attention,' he mumbled, 'strangers, not right, declaration,' his voice faded away, and he collapsed. Purple-face and pin-legs pulled him up again, and stood supporting him, while his head swayed and bobbed like a balloon on a string.

'We the British people cannot will not shall not endure a foreign foot in our territory.' All the elders raised a quavering cheer that was reinforced instantly by the shouts of the crowd. 'We announce these foreigners...' he stopped, choking, and a younger man hobbled forward and banged him on the back. 'We announce them—what's the word? I've forgotten that word.'

Suggestions came from the crowd. 'Unwelcome,' a hoarse voice said. 'Spies, traitors, criminals.'

'No, no, no,' the old man said. His supporters, unable to hold him up any longer, let him fall, and he lay on the ground for a moment, mumbling. Purple-face and pin-legs wiped their brows, spat, and hauled him up again.

'We announce them—when we've heard the evidence, then we'll announce them,' the old man said. He sat down, beaming, and the crowd shouted and cheered.

Grame waited until the shouting was over. 'Let's hear the evidence,' he said in a strong voice.

'She poisoned the boy,' a man said. 'She gave the boy poisoned water in his throat. Then he bled from the lips and died. My words are true. If anyone doubts them, they may still see the body of the boy.'

'I saw her give the poisoned water,' an old woman shrieked, 'and I saw the boy die.'

'She entered my cave and attacked my wife and children and father,' a man shouted. 'When the priest came, he found her in the cave.'

'It is true,' the priest intoned.

'The tall man threatened the priest with death.'

'He claimed to be a messenger of Thay.'

'He ordered a body to be burnt.'

'He threatened the I-Spy men with an axe.'

'It is all true,' said the priest. 'I say that it is all true.'

The oldest of the elders was lifted to his feet again, and had already begun to mumble when the priest shouted: 'Here come the witnesses of a new crime against the law,' Every head turned in obedience to his pointing finger.

The group that now hurried towards the fire looked very ugly indeed. The men had discarded their shoulder skins, and wore only brief, hairy trousers. Their pale heads swayed in a rhythmic hysteria. They were singing a repulsive little song. In the middle of the group was a young woman. When she came within reach of Grame she shrieked on a long, persevering, almost unbearable note. Hep waited until she had stopped. 'It's the grateful populace come to drink your blood, Grame,' he whispered.

'That's the man,' she cried, when she had recovered her breath. 'The man who killed the dog.'

'He killed a dog,' the crowd chanted. 'He killed a dog. He killed a dog.' With each reiteration their voices grew louder, until the words were buried in the uproar.

The priest stepped forward and raised his arms, silencing the shouters, group by group, until everyone was quiet.

'A sacred dog,' he stated. 'We fear the displeasure of Thay.'

'We fear,' the crowd moaned.

'Thay says the killer of the dog must die,' the priest remarked in offhand tones. It was part of his strength that he now appeared to be a much more reasonable man than anyone else present. He leant towards Grame and said in a quiet, explanatory voice: 'I am against killing. But it's not in my hands. It's one of Thay's decisions.' He turned back towards the lawyers. 'We are all merciful,' he stated. 'We do not wish to kill. By Thay's decree the killer of the dog must die. What is the decision of the lawyers? It is for the President to speak.'

'He killed the dog,' the girl shrieked. 'The dog attacked me by Thay's command. I must have sinned,' she added in a wondering voice.

Brown, who had maintained a careful silence, now spoke. 'Of course you must have sinned, or the dog wouldn't have attacked you,' he said sternly. 'And your sin led to the death of the dog. Thay is merciful, or the dog would have killed you.'

'Thay is merciful,' the crowd agreed quickly.

'And this man Grame is the instrument of his mercy,' Brown said calmly. 'Thay chooses his instruments carefully, as our priest knows. Let us bless the stranger, the instrument of Thay.'

A few voices in the crowd took up the cry of 'Bless the stranger,' these were probably Brown's friends and supporters: they shouted with enormous energy, and were soon copied by forty or fifty more, who were willing to shout anything for the sake of shouting. The crowd was now divided; the smaller section, led by Brown, crying: 'Thay says Bless the stranger'; while the others bellowed:

'He killed a dog. Death to the killer of Thay's dog.' An isolated voice could sometimes be heard, shrieking: 'These two have been chosen by Thay. Let them share the first empty cave!' Those near enough to hear this suggestion took it up, completing the confusion. Grame looked quickly at the girl. Her attempts to have him killed had not endeared her to him, and he thought now that she looked spiteful and feeble-witted.

Valya's gift for quick thinking and determination were stimulated by the emergency. 'Where did you kill this dog?' she whispered to Grame. 'Can you say exactly?'

'Yes. North-north-east—small clearing—about half a mile,' he answered. 'Oh—one beech and three stunted thorn trees in the middle.'

She turned to Hep. 'Could you find it?' she said to Hep.

'I know it.'

'Listen, Hep. They're not thinking of you now, only Grame. Go there quickly and bury the dog. Then wait. If we run, we'll run that way. If we come with the others, it will be to prove there never was a dog. Mix with the crowd at the other side, while they're still shouting, then leave from behind the priest.'

Hep nodded, moved over, apparently to speak to Brown, then worked slowly to the other side of the circle, while Grame, to divert attention, cried as loudly as he could: 'You wish me to share a dwelling with this woman?'

The crowd quietened down gradually as it tried to hear his words.

'You wish me to live with this woman?' he asked again. 'Are you sure that this is Thay's design?'

'No,' the priest said. 'We are not. We fear that Thay's design is death.'

'There is room for disagreement,' Brown said. 'I wish to speak, not to the priest of Thay, but to the elderly lawyers. It is their task to decide what shall be done. I have twelve

statements to make,' he said firmly, and began at once, in a slow impressive voice, to make them, while the elders nodded and blinked or fell asleep, and the priest listened, with his face cold in the firelight. Brown claimed that the strangers obeyed every law they knew of, and could not be punished for breaking laws of which they were ignorant; that the boy was already dying, as everyone realised, when the strangers risked their lives in an effort to save him; and that the girl was known to be the willing victim of strange fancies, or what was she doing alone in the woods? Then he discussed, at considerable length, the advantages of written arithmetic, and claimed that with Grame's help the entire tribe would soon be master of this easy method of checking each man's property.

The priest listened with evident attention to the arithmetical part of the argument. 'This matter may be of interest,' he assured Brown, 'but it is no defence of the strangers to claim that they assumed the disguise of teachers. All instruction comes, and always must come, from Thay through his priests. As for your other arguments, they have no force.' He then made a long speech, with dramatic gestures. 'Finally,' he claimed, 'not only has Thay been scorned, but the five Goodfellows, the only five entitled to kill a dog, have been disgraced by this stranger.'

'The woman's story is not true,' Valya shouted. 'We claim that no dog was there.'

'No dog was there?' the crowd echoed in surprise.

'No dog was there. The girl's a liar,' Brown and his supporters cried.

'The dog was there,' the girl screamed. 'The dog was there. Or why are his wrists bound? The dog bit his wrists and he killed it.'

'My wrists are bound because a vampire bird tore them while I slept,' Grame said boldly.

'Oh,' the crowd sighed. Even Brown's friends didn't take up the cry of the vampire bird.

'The proof of my story is that no dog is or ever was where you say I left its carcass.'

'It's in the clearing of the three thorn trees,' the girl screamed.

'It's not there. No dog is there. No dog ever was there,' Grame shouted.

'The girl's a liar, the girl's a liar,' the crowd cried.

'She's neurotic,' Valya shouted.

'Neurotic,' Brown repeated with satisfaction, lingering over the strange word. 'Neurotic,' he shouted.

'Neurotic,' everyone shouted after him. They liked the word, and began to chant: 'Neurotic, neurotic, neurotic. Yah, yah, neurotic. She made up the dog, she made up the man. Yah, yah, neurotic.'

The priest whirled his arms around in an appeal for silence, but it was two or three minutes before the noise had died down enough for him to be heard.

'The foreigners shall not escape,' he said loudly. 'The body of the dog may or may not be in the clearing. It may already have been devoured by birds or beasts.'

'The President must speak,' Brown shouted.

The old man was pushed to his feet again, while the priest muttered in his ear and two other old men wiped the drowsiness from his eyes.

'We have heard the evidence,' the old man mumbled. 'We announce them——' he paused again, while the word escaped his wavering wits.

'Neurotic,' half the crowd suggested. 'He killed a dog, she poisoned the boy,' the rest shrieked, and the children, cavorting round the edge of the crowd, cried: 'Neurotic,' and 'Poison,' with excited impartiality.

'We announce them neurotic,' the old man said in confusion. 'Poisoners. Outlaws,' he said at last in triumph.

‘That’s it. Outlaws. We’ll vote and call them outlaws. To be killed on sight now or any other time by anyone.’

Grame looked round at Brown, who had drawn his dagger and was feeling the point. ‘Are you going to fight for us?’ Grame asked.

Brown turned. His usual melancholy, pleasant face, was contorted. ‘Outlaw,’ he snarled, ‘and to think I gave you shelter.’

The people who stood near, having no doubt that Brown meant instant violence, surged apprehensively back.

‘The old men must vote,’ Brown whispered. ‘How many trees can you put between us in the time of a hundred words?’

Valya turned her anxious face to Grame. ‘Does he mean run?’ she asked.

‘That’s what he means,’ Grame said. ‘Listen, go now, instantly, to Hep, and wait for me not more than twenty minutes. If they follow you, turn and fire just once, then run again. I’ll go first, the other way. They’ll come after me. When I start, go. There will be just a second, understand, when everyone sees me go. That’s the second to run. Brown, lead the chase after me. Ready?’

He turned and ran back towards the caves. He had no gun, but he had six sticks of dynamite. He rushed into the entrance of the first cave. He could do nothing, unless two minutes could be saved somewhere. He went to the back of the cave and fumbling in the firelight, opened his pack, dragged out the dynamite. He heard Brown, shouting for vengeance, lead the crowd past the mouth of the cave. He fixed the detonators and a yard of fuse to two sticks of dynamite. He took a burning stick from the fire and walked slowly out of the cave. The last of the crowd had passed and the first were turning back, shouting angrily that Brown had tricked them. Grame lit the fuse. The first men

saw him by the light of the burning stick, and hurled their spears at him. Grame threw the dynamite ten yards from him.

'Back, in the name of Thay,' he bellowed, 'the Big Bang is coming.'

He saw them hesitate, then turned and ran for his life, with the crash of the dynamite in his ears.

He ran to the centre of the clearing, where the old men were still tottering round the fire. As he passed, he picked a burning branch from the fire and threw it at them, to confuse their wits, then ran on into the forest, picking his way carefully across the moonlit ground.

When he came to the clearing where the thorn bushes grew he called softly for Valya and Hep, and they glided out of the trees to join him.

'We've escaped,' he said briefly. 'So long as we keep moving.'

'I'd be happier if we could stop somewhere and light a fire,' Hep said wearily. 'Speaking as a zoologist, I don't care for this forest after dark.'

'We must move,' Grame said, and sat down, emptied of action as the wrong end of an hour glass.

'Come on, Grame,' Hep said. 'We've got to go. You know it.'

'All right,' Grame said, sitting still.

'Back to the Amphibian,' Hep said with enormous relief. 'I'd sooner spend a night up to my neck in mud than stop here.'

'But we're not going to the Amphibian,' Valya said. 'We're going on to the city.'

Hep cursed, fluently and viciously, while Grame listened, glad of the opportunity to sit still. 'If you must go on,' Hep finished bitterly, 'I'll stop here. Dying's not so pleasant that I want to do it slowly.'

Grame's face had changed, and he was now listening

intently. 'Someone's coming,' he whispered. 'He must be killed quietly.'

He stood up. 'Grame,' a voice called softly.

'Brown,' Grame said. 'I didn't know if I'd killed you. You were in front.'

'No one was killed, but everyone was frightened. They have gone mad now, I think. They are burning my wooden house, and my woman is afraid, and joins them. She also tells them that I helped you to go. I took away her green stoncs. I have brought spears for you, and food, and now I shall go to the Yorks. And you?'

'We go back to our flying machine,' Hep said.

'We go to the city,' Valya said.

'Where does Grame go?' Brown asked.

'To the city,' Grame said.

'I will help you on the way,' Brown said, 'but I will not go to the city.'

Chapter Thirteen

ON THE FIRST night they walked for four hours and then rested. Brown and Grame lit the fire and sat beside it, talking easily, while the others slept. Hep woke once, and listened curiously to Grame's voice.

'The brain has thousands of millions of cortical cells,' he repeated incredulously. 'That's a thing to talk about on a night like this.' He rolled himself up again and went back to sleep.

'We will sleep too,' Brown said. 'What happens to my thousands of millions of cortical cells while I sleep?'

'They think what they choose. They chase pictures through your brain, and you can't stop them, as you do when you're awake. They dream. They go mad.'

'So we are all mad by nature, and it is only when we are wide-awake that we can keep the mad part down? Then I think that is what is wrong with my people. They are not yet quite awake. To-night was part of their dream.' He lay down and slept. Grame stayed awake, watching the fire, until the darkness thinned, and the trees stretched blackly towards the grey sky, then, abruptly, he fell asleep.

In the morning they went on again, walking not too hurriedly, for they no longer had the fear of being pursued.

Travelling with Brown was easier than travelling alone. He had an ear that they lacked for the noises of the forest, and an eye for the easiest line of country. He took Grame hunting with him every day, and taught him how to walk silently, and to wait concealed by the drinking pools. Each

day they killed a wild pig, a giant lizard, or some of the little horses. Grame practised with his spear, and became nearly as adept as Brown in throwing at a mark, although Brown was quicker in the striking down of game. There was always fresh meat, and when they heard the noises of the dogs they lit their fire. 'There are also,' Brown warned, 'the striped creatures that kill. They are worse than the dogs, except that they hunt alone.'

On the fourth day Brown led them to the top of a hill, where they could see the forest rolling for endless miles, until the green trees became blue, and the blue trees melted into the sky. No other human creatures could even be imagined in the infinity of trees.

'You are sure there is a city, Brown?' Valya asked uneasily.

'They say there is a city. I have never said I am sure. Perhaps I was asleep,' he said, smiling at Grame, 'when I thought there was a city. I have not said that I will take you to the city, but from here I will take you to a place near where the city may exist.'

Hep looked down and over the forest into the blue that it caught from the sky, like a lake. 'This could be rich country,' he said reflectively. 'Can you imagine it, Valya, with the trees grubbed up, crops growing, trains going along the valleys, machinery turning in the factories?'

'And a grading machine grinding out stupidities in every town,' Grame said angrily 'Let it alone, Hep, I like it as it is.'

Hep grinned. 'That reminds me. Have you stopped to think we may already be at war with yellow America? Just think, Valya, a war, siege and famine and murder and weeping; departures at dawn and crashing aeroplanes; crumbling towns and infinite occasions for heroism—and you not there to lead the masses, shout commands, and inspire everyone with your magnificent courage.'

‘Be quiet, Hep,’ she said. ‘Oh, do you think it’s true? Do you think we may be at war? Yes, it may be true. We’ll find the city and then we’ll go home.’

Grame looked again at the long, steady waves of the forest, and then walked away from the others and quickly downhill. They followed him, but he was imprisoned in his own thoughts, and at first would not speak even to Brown.

‘What’s wrong with Grame?’ Valya asked Hep. ‘You’d think we’d said something to make him angry.’

‘He’s turning into a noble savage,’ Hep said comfortably. ‘He was looking over the hills at his prospective hunting grounds when I spoilt it all for him by bringing up the ugly subjects of civilisation and war.’

At the foot of the hill they rested. Grame lay down with his back to the others, staring through the trees. Brown sat near him, smoothing the shaft of a spear. Then he stopped, with his head a little to the side, in a listening attitude. ‘Do you hear that, Grame?’ he asked quietly.

Grame sat up, Hep and Valya stopped talking, and a harsh roar entered their heads like an explosion, wrecking the pattern of their thoughts. They waited, and in a few minutes heard it again, but this time it was louder and nearer.

‘It is the striped creature, and it hunts,’ Brown said. ‘Grame, shall we hunt this creature before it hunts us?’

Grame nodded, and the two of them left with their spears.

‘Grame says Come, Brown, and Brown says, Come, Grame,’ Valya complained bitterly to Hep. ‘It’s never Come, Valya, or Come, Hep.’

‘They’re being tactful,’ Hep said. ‘They want to leave us together, and I hate hunting. I like a man in a white coat to wheel in a prepared specimen on a glass trolley. Anyway, now they have left us alone, what about it, Valya?’

‘What about what?’

‘What about being in love and being together. You and me in this forest?’

‘Hep, how dare you! Have you forgotten that I’m a Bride of the State?’ She stood up and looked down at him, her magnificent eyes were volcanoes of fury.

‘All right, Valya,’ he said sadly. ‘I thought you might have forgotten your husband the State—only temporarily, of course, the way husbands do sometimes get forgotten. But I see now that you are a bride with ideals. Just ignore the fact that I spoke at all. I thought your ideals might have got a bit mildewed, in the woods.’

‘A Bride of the State is a Bride of the State for ever,’ she said more calmly.

‘Your ideals are certainly very strong. They’ve taken you all the way from the comparative security of the Amphibian through this murderous country to a city that doesn’t exist. Any husband would be pleased, just so long as he didn’t prefer you to come back alive. Listen to that brute roar—it’s probably about to sink its teeth in Brown—or Grame.’

He watched her eyes change. ‘Do you think Grame will be hurt?’ she asked painfully.

‘If the Council of Forty was in there with that brute roaring, would you be so upset?’ Hep asked. ‘Hey, it’s coming the wrong way!’ He jumped up, grasped her hand, and wrenched her back into the trees. They waited, with their ears filled with the noise from the wild throat, then a great black-and-yellow creature with long, projecting teeth bounded into the clearing.

It stopped, listening, then drew its hungry head down into the shining shoulders. A spear struck it in the side; the muscles rolled along its flank like whipped water; it turned, leaping. There was a whirlpool of colour; yellow of tiger, white and brown of men’s faces; a streak of red blood; the russet of churned leaves. Then Brown was on the ground

with his spear held upwards; Grame plunging forward with the long knife before him; the tiger between them. Hep flung his spear and struck the beast on the shoulder. The forest held and threw back the long, snarling roar of the tiger and the cries of the men. Valya flung herself forward and fired with her gun against the tiger's head, and with the noise of the shot the whirling scene collapsed into its separate parts.

The tiger was dead, with its body lying across Brown. They lifted the carcase away. Brown was badly clawed about the neck and shoulders. Valya dragged out dressings and applied them at once. Brown looked past her to Grame.

'Dying?' he asked.

'Not dying,' Grame said. 'When the bleeding stops, you will be better. Your main arteries aren't touched. Blood goes round the body by the arteries and back by the veins,' he added foolishly.

'I don't understand,' Brown said, and closed his eyes. 'Tell me about blood,' he said weakly.

Grame told him about arteries and veins, red corpuscles and white corpuscles.

'But the white can't be seen,' Brown said wearily. 'It is strange. That was a wonderful bang that killed the tiger, although not the same as the bang you made when you left the village.'

'We could give him a blood transfusion,' Valya suggested. 'If we knew how.'

'I'm not going to let you kill him off for the sake of having one of the great moments of your life,' Grame said. 'Although I'm indebted to you for that shot.'

'He may get better,' Hep said. 'He won't be able to move for days. Might be weeks. Do you suppose we're in the tiger belt now?'

'I'll skin this one anyway. Can we eat tiger?' Grame

dug his knife into the soft skin by the tiger's throat and slit downwards.

'We'll have to. We can't hunt like Brown. How many shots have you left, Valya?'

'You know the answer is two. I had three. One went to the tiger.'

'So the next two tigers are our last,' Hep said, grinning without pleasure. 'We'll last a long time in this delightful spot.'

'Go on then,' Grame said flatly. 'You don't want to stop here. I'll wait with Brown. You go on.'

'Of course we don't want to stop here,' Hep shouted. He walked over and sat down beside Grame. He took out his knife and began to slit the skin on the tiger's legs. 'It's a kind of insanity that makes me feel one part of this forest is better than another. There's nothing to be found by moving on, and no reason why we shouldn't wait. It's the first time I've had a chance to skin a tiger. I've never seen one this size, or with teeth that stuck out like knives. I'd better take a few notes. That may fill in the time for the next month. What lectures I could give if I ever got back to the tedious life of the University!'

While the tiger was being skinned, Valya lit a protective fire, and they sat silent before it for hours. Grame fetched water from one of the deep pools in the nearest stream, and when he had boiled it he bathed Brown's wounds and plugged them with new dressings. He went back to the pool, stripped off his clothes, and slid cautiously into the water. The pool was wide enough to let him swim a few strokes, and the cool water was as cleansing as wind after fog.

He took one of the concentrated soap tablets and washed himself, and then his clothes. He wrung the clothes out viciously, and spread them on a rock where there was a little sun. He looked again at the water; there had been no

deep pools near the village; washing of any kind had been difficult. He stretched his arms to the sun, welcoming the heat on his clean skin, then he dived into the pool again. A shoal of little creatures, round as balloons, but with fins on their backs, rose from the bottom and fastened on to one of his legs. He struggled out and wrenched them off. They left only tiny punctures on the skin, but round each puncture the flesh was already rising.

He found some dry underclothes in his pack, pulled them on, and limped back to the others. He arranged his wet garments round the fire, then sat down and stared at the great blisters rising on his leg. He thought that there must be some way of forcing his body to overcome the poison, and he struggled with his mind, trying to make it give the right command.

He saw Hep's face, misty and wavering like ectoplasm, bending over him, and he tried feebly to put his hand through it. 'Don't swim,' he muttered, then went back to the struggle with his mind.

Valya and Hep watched the two sick men. Brown scarcely moved, and Grame was never still. His body was wet and glistening, as though he had just come from the pool. The poisoned leg was twice the size of the other.

They had meant to eat the tiger, but it lay outside the protective range of the fire, and the carrion birds fought over the carcase all night. In the morning there were only bones.

'We still have the skin, if we'd like to chew that,' Hep said. He went off with his spear and came back hours later with two furry little creatures like squirrels. He threw them in the pot unskinned, and later he and Valya ate them, scraping off the fur with their knives.

Grame woke up. 'Heat. Heat on my leg,' he said.

They put cloths in boiling water, then wrapped them round his leg. Half-way through the operation he fainted,

but the swelling, which had been increasing until it looked as though the whole leg would burst, at last subsided a little. When he recovered consciousness he demanded more heat.

They boiled the water again, but when Hep applied the first cloth Grame, beating wildly with his arms, hit him violently in the neck and knocked him to the edge of the fire.

'I'm burnt,' he said in an amazed voice, getting up.

'You'll have to hold me down,' Grame said in a clear voice.

They treated the leg six times that day, Hep holding him down while Valya applied the boiling cloths. The swelling steadily decreased. By the next day it had vanished, leaving raw skin where the blisters had been. A day later he could walk a few steps, although he was sick and dizzy from pain and hunger. They were all hungry, for Hep had been able to bring back nothing but a few more of the little furry creatures, and most of the flesh from these had been given to Brown, who lay still and uncomplaining. Hep had passed the painful stage of his hunger; he was a little light-headed now, like a man in need of oxygen, and too indolent to continue with the excruciating effort of throwing his spear at small evasive creatures. He sat idly by the fire, his mind lazily running over distant incidents, when he heard a slight noise and looked forward almost into the eyes of a tusked pig.

He flung his spear, and missed, then snatched the gun from Valya's belt, jumped, and shot. Blood spurted from the pig and it crashed back into the trees. Hep picked up his spear and ran after it, jabbing at it until the spear sank into the flesh. It fell then, and he snatched a rotting log and hit it on the head again and again until it died.

Hep leant against a tree, coughing and laughing hysterically.

'Oh, Hep, what's wrong?' Valya cried, running to him.

'I'm only applauding myself, the civilised man,' he said. He had stopped laughing, but he was still coughing so hard that there was water in his eyes. It was two minutes before he got the cough under control. 'Help me drag this back to the fire, Valya. I'm too weak or decadent to do it alone.'

Between them they managed to get the carcase back. Hep looked at his bloodstained hands. 'Now we slash this still-hot flesh and throw it in the pot,' he said drearily.

'There's only one shot left,' Valya said. 'It wasn't a wasted shot, this time, Hep.'

They ate the meat until they were full, and then lay down and slept and woke and slept again.

Brown managed to sit up, although his face was uniformly white, with no blood-colour in it. He watched Valya bending over the fire, and saw the green, transparent pendant swinging from her throat.

'You have the same stone as my wife's stones,' he said.

Valya smiled and shook her head. 'It's not possible. This comes from Africa.' She unfastened the pendant and held it out to him. He took it.

'The same,' he said.

'It isn't possible,' she said impatiently, taking the pendant from him.

'The same,' he muttered, and closed his eyes.

'What is it, Valya? An emerald?' Hep asked.

'No, it's not an emerald. I don't think you've ever seen anything like it in the world before,' she said, in an excessively casual voice. 'I don't think there's ever been anything like it in the world before.'

She held it out, and Hep and Grame studied it. 'Your precious stone looks very like green glass,' Hep said.

'Whatever it looks like, I can tell you it's not the same as the stones in the necklace Brown's wife wore.'

'It looks the same to me,' Grame said.

'Well, naturally you'd agree with Brown.'

'Did you ever look closely at her necklace? I did, on the last night. It was the same. I remember wondering why she should have a necklace made of glass, when there was nothing else in the whole settlement to suggest the Britons knew anything about glass.'

'Let's stop this stupid argument,' Valya said. 'The necklace can't be the same. If you like I'll tell you why it can't be the same. It was given to me as an honour just before I left. It's made of a very rare new stone. No one here could have it.'

'Brown took the necklace away from his wife. He has it with him. When he wakes he'll show you. He got the stones from what he called the place of green stuff—near the city—if there is a city.'

'I'm beginning to wonder if there ever was a city, or a civilisation here,' Valya said, staring with hatred at the forest.

In the morning, when Brown woke, he announced he was strong enough to go on. 'Wait, leave it another day,' Grame said, but Valya and Hep packed up hastily.

'Anywhere,' Hep explained, 'so long as it's further on. Even two miles would be an advantage. It's staying in the same place that's driving me mad, Grame.'

The tiger skin was beginning to reek, but they rolled it up with their other possessions and set off. Grame was limping badly, and Brown panted and sweated as he walked.

'I wonder how this country is for bears?' Hep said. 'Wouldn't you like to be back in Africa, Grame, in the mech-reps' hut?'

Grame tried to think of the hut, but it was buried under the rock of the world. He thought of his mother, calling up her face with difficulty. She might be dead, but dead or

alive her existence was the same to him. She was someone who had lived in the past, and now lived for ever, embalmed in his mind. If he stayed in this country until he was an old man, she would not move forward in his mind. She was alive and unaging as long as he lived.

He tried to explain some of his feelings to Brown. 'Yes,' Brown agreed weakly. 'Everything in the past is there, so long as someone lives to remember it. The bang you made when you left the village will be remembered until everyone who heard it is dead. Then your story will change, and a new priest will explain that all brown-skinned strangers are messengers of Thay. The Big Bang—the Bang that is supposed to have thrown our country in the air and dropped it again—happened long before the time of my thirtieth father. It's a memory we ourselves don't have, but it exists in some way. I think it's always made us frightened. Or perhaps it has been used to make us frightened.' He spoke sadly, and with difficulty, and afterward he and Grame were both silent for a long time.

They walked five or six miles, very slowly; Brown moved like a diver at the bottom of the sea. When they stopped, Grame made him comfortable, then limped about, gathering wood for the fire. Some of the wounds in Brown's chest had re-opened. To see someone die, Grame thought, was different. When you saw them die, they were not frozen in your mind, but emptied out of it for ever.

'We don't need a fire, Grame,' Valya said. 'We can go on in an hour, when he's rested.'

'He can't walk again to-day,' Grame said.

'But the wood's thick here, Grame. It's a bad place to stop. Anything could get within a yard of us before it jumped.'

'He can't walk. It might kill him.'

'All right,' Valya said. 'There's always someone Hep and I are waiting for,' she added.

Grame started up, his stomach churning with rage. 'Go on,' he shouted. 'Go on to your city and leave us.'

Valya glared at him. 'And if I order you to come with us?'

'I'll take no orders.'

Hep intervened. 'Don't give orders, Valya. We depend on each other. How could Grame get food and leave Brown lying alone here? And if one of us got hurt, it would be the same. And I'm a poor hunter. The last time you depended on me for food, we nearly starved.'

'Then you'd come with me, Hep?' Valya asked.

'Certainly,' he said easily. 'You're the leader.'

'But you think it's better to stay?'

'In this jungle, four are better than two. We can't survive if it's every man for himself.'

Valya directed a glance of hatred at Grame. 'We'll stay, not because of you or Brown, but because what Hep says is true. We depend on each other. But please understand that doesn't make me like you any more.'

He didn't answer, and for the next two days he didn't voluntarily address her. Occasionally he had muttered conversations with Hep, and once or twice he left them and went into the forest with his spear and his axe. He had learnt from Brown how to move silently, and listen for the trembling of bushes or the rustling of disturbed leaves. He tracked two black and white creatures, about the size of small pigs, to their den, and killed them both. The next day he brought back a hard-scaled lizard, three feet long without its tail.

They woke Brown and asked him if it was fit to eat, and he nodded. He was recovering quickly. He told them to throw it in the embers of the fire and cook it in its own scales. Then he pointed to the pulpy, pink fruit that hung from nearby trees, and nodded again, so for the first time they dared to eat the wild fruit.

Brown smiled when they put some in his hand. 'I will come with you now to the city,' he said. 'Yes, we will go to the city.'

When Brown was stronger he looked again at Valya's pendant, then opened the bag that hung from his belt, and brought out the necklace that he had taken away from his wife.

'They look the same. I agree they look the same,' Valya said. 'But they can't be.'

'We'll soon come to the place of the green stuff,' Brown promised. 'But first, the black stone that burns. To-morrow we can go on again.'

Valya was listening to the howling in the forest. 'Dogs?' she asked.

'Dogs,' Grame said. 'We'd better carry some dry wood on top of our packs. Then we can light a fire quickly if we need it.'

'Do you know,' Hep said in wonder. 'When I was young we used to go to the woods for picnics. For fun.'

Chapter Fourteen

THE DOGS LURKED around the fire that night, and when they started off the next morning, the dogs followed like discreet policemen, prepared to make an arrest at a prearranged moment. They followed all day, never seen as more than a shadow blowing through the trees, never heard as more than a distant howl. For some reason, they didn't attack.

'You never know what a dog's reasons are,' Brown said.

That evening, Hep shook his head when Grame picked up his spear. 'Better go hungry than into the woods alone,' he said. 'I'd come with you—but should we leave Valya and Brown?'

'I have my gun,' Valya said contemptuously.

'And one bullet,' Hep pointed out. 'Don't waste it on a dog. Wait for something big, like a dinosaur. Anyway, Grame mustn't go hunting. It's too much of a strain for me, thinking of reasons why I shouldn't accompany him. To-night we'll sleep with a fire front and back.'

They had some meat left from that morning, and they ate it slowly. When they had finished Hep picked up the biggest bone and flung it into the trees, and there was a howl and a crash as a dog jumped for it.

'Ground bait,' Hep said. 'Now we throw out a bone on a hook.'

In the morning the howling of the dogs sounded very near.

'On,' Brown said suddenly in a strong voice. 'On, and the woods will end. We may come to your city, Valya.'

They went on, downhill now, and as they walked, light began to come to them horizontally through the tree trunks and grew stronger as the forest thinned. Suddenly they were in the open, staring at a bare ridge of hills, with, beneath them, great pits in the ground.

'The dogs will stay in the woods,' Brown said with satisfaction. He led them to the edge of the pits, and they looked down to the shining jet beads of water far below.

'This would be just the place to get rid of the senior science controller who thought up this expedition,' Hep said. 'I'd like to see him climb out of that.'

Brown waved towards the barren hills that rose beyond the pits. 'And there is the black stone that burns,' he said.

They went cautiously round the pits, a mile or more, to the bald, black hills.

'Here nothing grows,' Brown said, contemptuously kicking at the black rock. Some loose pieces fell, and Grame picked them up. They carried them to the grass, and when they had lit a wood fire they put the black rock on top. At first there was only smoke, then the wood flame lifted through the heart of the rock, and set it burning fiercely.

'It's coal, all right,' Hep said. 'Straight out of the geological museum. May I leave you for a little, out here in the open? Or do you suppose there's a risk that I might be carried off by eagles?' He looked up at the great birds that idled above their heads, close enough for the abrupt curve of their beaks to be observed as a threat. 'They come low, don't they? Hold on to your eyes till I get back.'

He went off, and wandered up and down the ridges while the others lay and looked up through the leafless air into the blue illusions of the sky.

In an hour Hep returned. 'The hills are made of it,' he said. 'Oh, Valya, if there was some way of getting this stuff

home! We'd be national heroes. With this and electricity we needn't worry about oil for a hundred years.'

'It would be useful in war,' Valya said.

'Do you know what I think?' Hep said, 'If we can't get the coal back to Africa, we could bring a bit of Africa here. We could build the factories here, use the coal on the spot. There's iron too, or so Brown thinks. We could make the machinery here in Britain, and fly it home to Africa.'

'It's a dream,' Valya said, without looking round. 'I wonder. Hep,' she said, sitting up. 'It's an idea. We'd have to be sure of the iron. Hep—if we could be sure of the iron—but we'd have to fly food in for the workers.'

'The first thing you do is send in an agricultural unit. Clear some land, begin growing food. Follow them up right away with building assemblers. Get the huts, then send in the workers. Link the iron and coal by rail if necessary, then build the furnaces and the factories. It's a job that will take a few years, but what a job!'

'I didn't know you had such vision, Hep,' Valya said in deep approval. 'But we'd have to make sure of the iron. Brown, tell us about the iron.'

'He's asleep,' Grame said in a surly voice. 'Let him alone. And why not let the country alone too, while you're about it.'

'So you're afraid we'd ruin your paradise,' Hep said unpleasantly.

'Don't bother about Grame,' Valya said. 'He's atavistic.'

'Look, Grame, you can't stop development. Once it's started, it goes on. It's a law. There are always a few people who prefer a power station to a waterfall, and a few millions who prefer a dance floor to a thousand acres of forest. When development starts, even when it's only an idea in someone's head, it can't be stopped. So don't get bad-

tempered when I say it is absolutely inevitable that the coal over there will be used to run factories, and much sooner than you think. You can't stop it. Even if you cut Valya's throat and mine and your own you can't stop it. If we don't get back, what happens? They send another expedition. If Africa doesn't, America will. We're in an era of colonisation now, you know. I'm surprised Britain was left so long. The only credit I take to myself,' Hep said modestly, 'is that I've thought of bringing the factories to the coal instead of taking the coal to the factories. Oh, think of it, Grame! Can't you get excited at the thought of factories and furnaces and towns rising in Britain?'

'And mech-reps' huts and concrete roads. Political meetings and grading machines and working to doh-dee-dah music.'

'The British people, what there are of them, would think it was heaven. And if they wouldn't, then it's time they woke up.'

'Is that all you can get when you wake up?' Grame asked. 'Our kind of civilisation, complete with wars -and atomic weapons, now? Hep, haven't you had some kind of satisfaction out of life in the forest, that you've never had at home?'

'Not much. But yes, I've had a little. Look, I'll be honest. In the middle of the misery I've sometimes had enormous delight from the forest. But we can't all live in the forest all the time.'

'It's an argument about nothing,' Valya said. 'Until we find the iron, there's nothing to discuss. If the iron's there we'll find it, with Brown's help. But what we have to do first is to get to the city. It's been our aim since the beginning, and don't forget it, Hep.'

'Very well, then, to the city,' Hep said sourly. 'I don't believe there is one, but let's go to it.' He had some lumps of coal in his hand and he stuffed them into his shoulder

bag. 'When we get back, you can tell them you had a dream about the city, but I'll show them this.'

Brown woke up and sniled at Grame, who went to him at once with water.

'Is there iron, Brown, we asked you before? Could you find it?' Hep asked.

'I think it's time we went on,' Valya said.

'Yes, I think there is this iron rock,' Brown said. 'Now we will go on to the city.'

'We'd better bury the fire before we go,' Grame said. 'Or Hep's dream will burn itself out. I'd like to see those hills on fire,' he said, grinning at Hep, who, surprisingly, smiled back at him in total friendliness.

'Don't kill me before we get home, Grame. I'm useful for carrying wood and skinning tigers and things of that sort.'

Valya had her pack on and was waiting impatiently to go. She stood and looked disparagingly at the hills of coal, while Grame helped Brown to his feet. 'The coal may not be as important as you think, Hep,' she said. 'You must realise that. You heard the tape record of the division of the atom. Do you know, with that new power, we can run every factory in Africa?' She took out her pendant and dangled it before them. 'Shall I tell you what this green glass is? They exploded the divided atoms, secretly, in the Southern Desert, and for miles around, the desert turned to glass. This glass. They took some of it, and when they found it was safe they made medals from it for everyone who had helped with the work, and for some others they wished to honour. I was given this by the President himself, just before the Amphibian left. It's my first award from the President. It's one of my reasons for going on. I'm trusted by the state, and I'm going on to the city.'

'To-morrow,' Brown promised, 'to-morrow we reach the city.'

When they left the ragged black hills they came again to woods, but this time the trees were dwarfed and twisted, and it was always possible to see the sky. It was easy country to walk through, and no animals attacked them. Brown was the only one of them who was tired when they stopped for the night. He lay in the half-conscious state when a man may see illusion or another reality. Grame made him comfortable on a pile of leaves, then left with his spear to find food for the night.

He came back with two big rock lizards, and buried them under the hot ashes of the fire to cook. Then he sat beside Brown with his back to the fire.

'You behave as though we weren't here, Grame,' Valya said.

'But I'm aware of you,' Grame said. 'I can feel you at the back of my neck, driving me on to the city. Is that why we're going, or is it because Brown suddenly wants to get there too? Why did he change his mind?' he asked uneasily.

'We had to go on after we'd been driven out of the village. If we hadn't gone on we'd have spent the rest of our lives in defeat. The only way we live is to be determined to go on. The human race would have vanished long ago if it had ever admitted it was better to go back,' Valya said.

'Do you suppose those lizards are cooked?' Hep asked. 'Noble sentiments rest more easily on a full stomach. Like drink. And I prefer drink. I'd sooner wash those lizards down with a couple of bottles of red wine than with two thousand inspiring words from the President himself.'

Grame took a long stick, and began to push the lizards slowly from the heart of the fire. He slit them open with his knife and cut up the soft, hot flesh. He offered some first to Brown, who would not eat. Then he wrapped half the flesh in leaves, and shared what was left with the others. When he had eaten, he pretended to sleep.

The next morning they started early, and in a few hours

came out of the stunted wood on to bare, rough rock, where nothing grew and nothing moved, except for minute white spiders that drifted gently on the light breeze; landing on their faces and clothes; sifting into their hair and down their necks. Here and there they were thick enough to be seen as floury clouds. Every one of them that reached flesh, bit, and left a small irritated patch behind. The men found them a gross annoyance, but Valya, who until then had endured everything without a sign of fear, was at last reduced to terrified misery. Hep and Grame, who had long ago accepted the fact that she was their equal in endurance, walked on grimly with their heads down, not looking at her nor thinking of her, scarcely aware of her, even when she began to moan a little with each intake of breath. Grame finally looked round and saw her beating her arms in the air in a wasted effort to drive the spiders away.

He let go Brown's arm and went to her. 'I can't—Grame, I can't— I must go back to the woods—out of this—only for a few hours— then we can start again. I can't go on with this,' she said, clawing frantically at her face.

Hep turned back, and he and Grame looked at each other in dismay. They were both afraid that if she gave up, it might be for ever.

Grame wiped her face and neck with a medical sponge. He took a shirt from his pack. 'I'm going to put this over your head, Valya,' he said. 'Then it's only your hands they can reach. You won't be able to see through the shirt. One of us must lead you.'

They went on very slowly, with Grame supporting Brown and Hep leading Valya. In the afternoon the cloud of spiders thinned down, and soon there were only a few isolated specks floating in the air. The men suggested taking off Valya's hood, but she asked them to leave it until there were no spiders to be seen anywhere.

That was why she was the last of the four to see the city.

When Brown stopped and cried faintly: 'The City,' all that Grame and Hep saw was the edge of another forest.

'No city there,' Grame muttered, 'only trees.' Then he saw the jutting geometrical lines that cut the sky above the wandering tree-tops. 'It's the city, Valya,' he said, and took off her hood.

She looked at the trees. 'In there,' she said in a voice of ecstasy, and began to walk faster. Hep followed her, impassive as a financier studying the accounts of a rival enterprise. Grame turned anxiously to Brown, whose face was illuminated, like a young soldier returning from foreign service to the country of his boyhood. He hurried on, breathing quickly in a way that Grame didn't like.

'Sit down and rest,' he said.

'No.' Brown walked faster. Like Grame and Hep, he had been badly bitten by the little spiders, and the drops of sweat that rolled from his brow followed an erratic course down his face, hesitating at each lump and turning round it. He began to talk in an urgent voice.

'Grame, I told you lies. I've been to the city before, but I think it's true. I was mad. I don't know the city, only that it was very strange. I must have been here, or how could I know the way? I didn't want to take you, but in the end I couldn't come alone. Something will happen to me, something will be done, for taking you to our city. We built it when we were the strongest people, at the time when we conquered the world.'

'I didn't know you'd conquered the world,' Grame said gently.

'Yes, we're told. Then there was the storm, the whirlwind, the flood, the rising of the sea and the falling of the mountains. There was more than one city, but the others fell in dust and were blown away by the wind. Only this city was left to us as a sign.'

‘But why is it so secret?’ Grame asked.

‘I don’t know. All our other cities were taken. If we want to keep this one, we mustn’t talk of it. To most people it’s only something they’ve heard of from the dying. They’ve never seen it. They never tell their children, but the children think about it, just as they always think about their fathers’ secrets. When they get older, they know it’s not to be mentioned—until it’s time for them to die. You heard that boy? He cried for it before he died. That’s how it goes on—the dying talk about it, and the living listen, and wonder if it’s true, and talk about it when they die. But they don’t see it.’

‘But you’ve seen it, Brown?’

‘I think I have. I never told my own people.’

‘And now you’ll see it again.’ Grame put an arm round him to hold him up. ‘Shouldn’t we rest before we go on?’

Brown didn’t listen. ‘I shouldn’t have brought you,’ he said. ‘There’s a story that a brown man came here before—I think in my grandfather’s time—I don’t know.’

‘But it’s not a city of brown people? No brown kings?’

‘No king of any sort. There was a king. The king of a golden city,’ he said in a confused voice. ‘I don’t know what happened to him. Grame, I shouldn’t have brought you here. Go back.’

‘You can’t go on alone.’

‘We are nearly there. Here are the trees.’

They went suddenly out of the sunshine into the splashed shade of greenish-black trees that looked a little like cypresses. The ground beneath them was covered with clean, dry, needles. It wasn’t like walking on the spongy floor of the other forest, where at any step you might sink waist-deep in rotted leaves. Here progress was firm and easy, and here it seemed that Brown could no longer force himself to walk.

He stopped and asked for water, but he drank only a few drops when the bottle was put to his lips.

‘Wait!’ Grame shouted to the others.

Hep turned round angrily, but when he saw Brown’s face his expression changed.

‘I’m breaking apart,’ he said. ‘Valya, order me to sit down for ten minutes and I’ll do it.’

Valya looked at him with raging impatience, and Hep sat down. Grame lowered Brown carefully to the ground and sat beside him. ‘He says there was a brown man here a long time ago,’ he told the others. ‘It might have been, what was his name? Garrett?’

‘Oh, yes, the dog-lover. Garrett said the city was of gold, perhaps,’ Hep said.

‘Yes, it’s the golden city,’ Brown muttered. ‘But there’s no gold.’

Grame wiped his dripping, swollen face and gave him a few more drops of water.

‘Let’s go on,’ Valya said, not looking at anything but her vision.

‘Yes, to the city,’ Brown whispered, with his face transformed by hope. The two other men raised him and held him, one on each side, as he staggered forward.

The trees grew patchily now, and when they saw the first fallen blocks of stone they realised that at last they had come to the city.

Chapter Fifteen

THE FIRST LUMPS of stone lay in isolation, with no sign of any parent building. It was as though they had been thrown aimlessly into the woods. In a few hundred yards the stones lay thicker, and there were broken slabs of concrete, riddled with rust-stained holes. Then the tumbled heaps of stone grew larger, and soon they were walking between fallen walls on a thick-turfed lane that might once have been a street. In front of them the shell of a building stretched up for twenty feet. Dark olive streams of moss trailed loosely from it, rippling with little green lizards.

‘So this is the city,’ Valya said, painfully, like a child who has arrived at a door when the party is over. ‘Only ruins. No people, no palaces, no gold.’

‘It smells like the end of the world,’ Hep said.

‘What stone’s this that has stood so long?’ Grame asked, pointing to the high walls. He took his knife and cut away some of the foot-thick moss. Underneath, the stone was green and crumbling. Grame pushed with his finger until a loose lump fell. When he picked it up, it glittered in the sun. ‘Marble, perhaps?’ He dropped the fragment in his pack.

‘It must have been an important building. Perhaps we’re in the centre of the city and that—that green lump of ruin was the palace,’ Valya said.

This was not the centre of the city. They walked for

more than an hour, until the piled stones seemed as endless as the forest.

Most of the ruins were shapeless, but at one point they came to a narrow lane deep in spongy turf and creepers, where the walls on each side were high enough to block out the light. The lane turned through desolate hills of masonry, with plump little rat-like creatures running in and out of the crevices. These creatures showed no fear of man, nor interest in him, and this destroyed Valya's last hope that somewhere in this city there might still be people.

They began to wander aimlessly, and they had walked perhaps another mile when they felt hard stone under their feet. They were in what might once have been a wide street, but the street was blocked now with a tangled mass of pink-flowered shrubs. Beneath these the grass grew ochre and enfeebled. They found a long, low building with the gaps for doors and walls still clearly defined. They went through the doorway, into a morass of rusty slime. A few wrecked lumps of metal lay half-submerged in the mud.

'Machines,' Hep said. 'Let's get out of this.'

They went into another building where three low walls stood. The fourth had been pushed down by the trees. In one corner lay a mound of bones. Hep walked forward and looked, stirring the bones with his feet.

'Human,' he said, 'that was a lot of people once. Maybe they got trapped or starved or something.'

'We should take some of these. Anything could be discovered from them—about primitive man,' Valya said.

'This wasn't primitive man, Valya,' Hep said sourly. 'Look around you. This was civilised man, having a machine age.'

'It was a great city once. How could such a place end? I don't know what you think, but it doesn't seem to me as though it had been destroyed, suddenly. I think all the

ruin has been caused by time. But if the city was standing fifteen hundred or two thousand years ago, why did the people leave it?' she asked.

'Perhaps there were no people,' Hep said.

'No people? With the city still standing? And I'm sure it was still standing. If it had been destroyed by some terrible catastrophe—a hurricane, or an earthquake—fifteen hundred years ago, there would have been far less of it left to-day.'

'I think you're right, Valya,' Grame said. 'I'll tell you what I've been thinking. If the city was intact, or nearly intact, long after everything else had been destroyed, then it would be thought of as a miracle. All the Britons' culture to-day is handed down verbally. The city they venerate to-day isn't this mountain of ruins, but the real city that miraculously remained all those generations ago. No one—or almost no one—ever visits it, so they believe it still exists as it was. If all the people in the city were destroyed, and it was left quite empty, it would also be thought of as a dangerous place, better left alone. Is it supposed to be a dangerous place?' he asked, turning to Brown. He had been so horrified and enchanted by the ruined city that for an hour or two he had been aware of Brown only as a weight on his arm.

'Safety isn't what we find here,' Brown said.

Grame led the way into another wrecked building, dragging Brown with him, but here the pale-leaved trees grew so strongly inside that it seemed the walls were about to burst. They went out again and climbed over the fallen blocks of stone that were already soft under the obliterating grass.

'We should be able to find some ornaments, something,' Valya said. 'There must be more than fallen stone and crumbling walls. Even our own bushmen have spears and pottery.'

They found a street where most of the buildings, except of course the roofs, stood in one way or another; leaning wildly; tugged viciously by creepers; saturated by shrouds of moss; surrendering slowly and for ever to the wilderness. Grame hacked the creeper away from a gaping door and they went in, seeing again nothing above their heads but the jagged outline of the sky. They wandered across what might once have been a great hall, but now looked like an enclosed wood. Grame, kicking at the soft earth, felt hardness at his foot. He bent down and scraped with his hands. 'It's only stone,' he said, pulling it aside. Then he looked into the hole he had left, stretched his hand down, and brought up a crushed black bowl. He took out his knife and scratched it until he saw the glint of yellow. 'It's gold, Valya,' he said, tossing it to her. 'You can keep it.'

He took Brown's arm again, and felt him sagging heavily. He led him outside and made him sit while the others dug among the rubble, looking for golden relics to add to the little bowl. It was an hour before they gave up, and by then the clean light of the day was breaking into red fragments. Hep went in and out of the buildings, gathering dead wood from the trees. He built a fire, and they sat exhausted by wonder while the shadowy smoke drifted through the gaps in the walls behind them.

They caught some of the smooth, fat animals that looked as much like guinea pigs as rats, but Brown wouldn't eat. He slept uneasily for an hour, then woke up, muttering. 'The city. We must go on to the city.'

'We are in the city,' Grame told him.

'No,' Brown whispered. 'No. We must go to the city. We built it when we conquered the world,' he explained.

'Listen to me,' Grame said. 'You're not to talk of the city, Brown. Do you hear me? You're not to talk of the city.'

'I hear you,' Brown said.

‘Then do as I say. Don’t talk of the city. Don’t think of the city. You’re coming back with us on our flying machine. You’ll be the first Briton ever to fly. When we get back to Africa you’ll see every wonder in the world, in the greatest civilisation the world has ever known.’

‘The city. I must go to the Golden City,’ Brown whispered.

Grame bent over him. ‘Brown, when you talk about the city you’re giving up. You’re trying to die. Don’t talk about the city and don’t think about it. Don’t waste your thoughts on it. Think about how to live. What you have to do is fight, not dream about the city. We’ll stay here until you’re strong, then we’ll go back to Africa.’

‘Yes,’ Brown whispered. He fell asleep. When he woke an hour later he was muttering again about the city.

‘Stop it,’ Grame said in a fury. ‘You’re coming to Africa.’

‘Choking,’ Brown said indistinctly.

Grame put the water-pot on the fire and piled wood around it. He waited for it to boil, then put it on the ground. ‘Now you must breathe steam,’ he said, ‘then you won’t be able to choke.’ He held Brown up while the steam rose in his face. He kicked Hep awake and told him to put more water on the fire to boil. Valya woke up, and helped Grame to drape a cover over Brown’s head and the pot, so that he was forced to inhale the steam. Hep fetched more water, and Grame arranged himself so that he could hold Brown and change the water-pots on the fire, and then told the others they could go back to sleep. They watched Grame fighting for Brown’s life, and then slept spasmodically through the night.

When they woke in the morning Brown was shivering, and Grame was wrapping him in warm clothes. ‘More wood,’ he said to Hep, who went obediently and gathered wood. When he had built up the fire again Brown was

breathing with a gurgling noise as though his throat was filled with bubbles.

Hep told Grame to go to sleep, and he lay down, but when he heard Brown's gurgling breath change and hesitate, he sat up at once and took the boiling water from the fire again.

'There are the drops,' Valya said hopelessly.

'They haven't saved anyone yet, but we could try,' Grame said. He took the phial from her. 'Brown, I'm giving you the African medicine that cures every illness. Open your mouth and swallow.' Brown swallowed, then Grame made him breathe steam again, then fed him with a few spoonfuls of the soup from the stewed rats. Hep and Valya sometimes watched, and sometimes wandered in the hollow ruins.

Grame nursed Brown all through the day. 'Not like a mother,' Hep said. 'Like a wolf.'

'But still he won't live,' Valya said.

Hep looked at her sharply. 'I tell you, Valya, Brown's the first creature Grame has ever loved--and if he dies he'll be the last. So don't set your heart on Grame.'

'We're in the city,' Valya said sadly. 'It's what we've fought for all those weeks, and it's wasted, totally wasted, because it's just another place where someone's dying.'

They went back to the fire, and she stared wearily at Brown.

'He's dying, Grame,' she said.

Grame turned on her in a rage. 'Who said he was dying? He's better.'

Brown didn't open his eyes. 'I'm better, Grame,' he breathed obediently. 'And now I must go to the city.'

'No. You want to come to Africa with me,' Grame said. 'Tell me you want to come to Africa.'

'I want to come to Africa,' Brown said, choking. Grame reached for the boiling water.

Valya walked away from the fire and Hep followed her.

'Brown's dying and Grame's mad,' she said. 'I'll go mad too if I listen to any more of it.'

'There's still a lot of city to explore,' Hep said. He led her over the buried streets and in and out of shattered buildings for most of the morning. When they went back Grame was putting warm cloths on Brown's chest. 'We want more wood,' he said to Hep.

This was the pattern of the next few days. Hep and Valya provided fuel and food; offered to look after Brown and were refused; then wandered disconsolately through the ruins, looking for relics of British civilisation, usually finding none, but occasionally being rewarded by the sight of disinal piles of time-poxed metal. Twice they dug up fragments of broken pottery.

'Machine-made, I'd say,' Hep observed.

'It must have been a machine-age,' Valya agreed drearily. 'It's all we've discovered about this city.'

On the fourth day, Brown began to improve. He talked no more about going to the city. He admitted that he was, in one way, already in the city. When he could sit up, and move without much pain, Grame drove him to his feet, and made him walk for a minute. On the second day he walked for five minutes; on the seventh, for an hour.

'We can start back to-morrow,' Hep said.

'Oh, no we can't. We're staying for another four days,' Grame stated. Valya and Hep went off again to examine the ruins that they had already come to hate. They had lost their way several times in the wilderness of reverted streets; they had been in and out of more than two hundred buildings; they had found nothing written, nothing made by hand, nothing of any importance.

'It's no good trying to change Grame's mind. It's like arguing with a tree. I don't want to see any more ruins.

I think I'll just sit still and watch the creepers grow,' Hep said.

Grame and Brown also explored the city on the last days, but they were purified by their struggle, and they saw a different city from Hep's and Valya's. Grame looked at civilisation retreating before the forest, and thought of cities and trees and desert, rising and falling in immense waves through time for ever. No separate human life had any importance in this infinite movement; the most any man could hope was that he might learn a little of the immensity he lived in. The moss and the creepers and the crumbled stone were parts of a scene that moved, if he had eyes to discern their motion; he looked at everything in a sad exaltation. Brown, so far as Grame could tell, worshipped every ruin as a symbol of his ancestry. Neither of them wanted to leave, but the city was inevitably a place that must be left.

'To-morrow,' Grame said at last, 'we must go on. We'll do four hours the first day; the next day, six. Then I think you'll be normal.'

'This expedition has degenerated into an organisation to look after Brown,' Valya muttered to Hep.

'So now we can try to get back to the Amphibian without losing credit with ourselves or with you, Valya,' Hep said with satisfaction. 'It wouldn't take more than ten days, if we moved fast.'

'We'll move. Back to your flying machine,' Brown said.

'If we can find the way.'

'I can find the way. But do you want to see this iron rock?'

'Is it far? Hep asked.

'Four or five days. I can't tell. It's in the country of the Yorks. I don't think they are a very fierce people, but sometimes they make wars.'

Valya made a quick excited movement with her hands, and Hep groaned.

'You look like a racehorse feeling the jockey's whip, Valya. You may want to go on and find out if these not very fierce people will want to make war on us, but I've had enough. I don't want to meet them. If Brown says the iron ore is there, I'll take his word for it, without adding ten days to our march and probably taking the rest of our lives off our lives. If we get back to Africa we can talk them into sending an expedition equipped to deal with temperamental savages. This city has taken the heart out of me. I say, let's get back.'

'I don't want to go any further. I agree with Hep,' Grame said unexpectedly. He was looking at Brown, and obviously measuring his chances of surviving a long march.

'There is also something you may wish to see that lies not too far from your direction,' Brown said.

'In the country of the Yorks?' Hep asked.

'In no one's country,' Brown said. 'I will not describe to you what this thing is, but you would like to see it, and it will make only a day or two more. It means we leave the city from the west, and we would not have to cross the rocks again.'

'We'll go your way,' Hep said, 'so long as it's quiet.' He looked questioningly at Valya. She, for once, was too dispirited to argue.

The next morning they set off to the west.

Before they left the city they came to a building that stood alone in a field of matted turf and creeper and of delicate pink flowers lined with gold. Valya put out her hand to pick one, and it dropped a tear of green slime that burnt through her skin.

She clutched her hand. 'Everything here is hideous, revolting, filthy!' she said angrily.

'We haven't seen any snakes,' Hep said cheerfully.

‘Think what it would be like if we had to walk across swarms of little snakes that poisoned us through our boots. Do you realise that we could have had a far worse time if we’d stayed at home and drunk ourselves crazy?’ While he talked he searched through all the packs until he found the last of the medical sponges. ‘No one is to pick flowers or pat strange dogs from now on,’ he said. He looked up queerly at the twisted trees, and across to the wreck of the black stone building. ‘I don’t think we’d better go in there, or we may find that we are only three cases of delirium after all.’

‘The forest is hideous to you only because you think it’s your enemy. In fact, it’s beautiful. It’s the most beautiful place I have ever seen in my life—except perhaps, the city,’ Grame said. ‘To-day, we are not hurrying. We’ll look at the last of the buildings.’

They followed him into a courtyard where the ruined pillars had nothing to hold up but the sky. The morning sun laid their shadows on the ground, great fingers that pointed to the west. Grame led the way through the elegant empty arch of a ruined window, and they walked into dusk, under the only roof left in the city. High above their heads the strong arches swept towards the sky and curved back, defeated. Between the arches the roof was beginning its fall into the dust of a thousand years: already there were segments of sunlight on the floor. One end of the building was only rubble.

Grame looked at the roof, while Hep and Valya, exploring among the falls of stone, found at last one stone with some nearly discernible letters carved on it.

‘There are figures,’ Valya said. ‘They look like 1993, but I couldn’t be certain.’ She took out her notebook, and copied faithfully the letter J, followed by nine or ten blanks. They all tried to discover, by fingering, what the letters might have been, but most of them were no more

than a roughness on the stone. On the last line the indentations grew deeper, and Valya wrote carefully, '—e p— a—e o— —od pas— — — — a— — und— — sta— — — ng.'

They left the building, each immersed*in his different thoughts. 'This might be a major archacological find,' Valya said. 'If only we could come back, and carry away that stone!'

'The last word must be "understanding",' Hep said.

'The first might be place, or phase, or plane, or even prase. We don't know how they spelt,' Valya said.

'It could be peace,' Hep suggested. 'I think peace or place is the most likely. The next one's on or of. Then it must be rod, or god, perhaps. Then pas— — that's more difficult.'

'Pasture,' Valya suggested. 'Or passers.'

'Pasture might do. I don't see how passers fits.'

'Passage,' Grame said.

'What have we got now?'

'The plane or phase of rod—no, it must be god—pasture or passage and understanding,' Hep said. 'Wait. What about the place of god's passage and understanding?'

'The place of god's passage and understanding. I think that's it. There's someth. ng satisfying about these words. So it was a religious building. What do you think, Brown? Was it a holy place?'

Brown, for a reason that Valya couldn't understand, looked angry and miserable. 'All the city is holy,' he said, and Grame hurried him on, away from Valya, back into the forest.

Within an hour they were so far out of sight of the city that it had already begun to sink back into the evasive depths of their minds, where it would live in half-reality until they died.

Chapter Sixteen

AT NOON, Grame slung his pack on the ground.
'We rest for two hours,' he said, not looking at Brown.

He picked up his spear and went into the woods, where he walked with his own thoughts, forgetting the animals that must be killed so that he and the others could eat. He should have moved so stealthily that the small burrowing creatures would stay unaware in the sun until he was close enough to stretch out his spear and touch them; but he had been in a mood of exhilaration since he had escaped from the dark, holy building; and now every leaf was a green glass for the sun to shine through; every tree contained the universe.

He swung his spear in the air, delighting in the strength and hardness of his muscles. He felt he was the strongest man in the world, and in this world of Britain it might be true. He thought of proving his strength by knocking down a few trees, but to destroy the trees he needed the cunning of fire or axe that he had inherited from his ancestors. The trees were stronger than he was, until he used man's accumulated experience against them.

He made himself walk cautiously, until he came to a pool where a dozen fawn-coloured deer were drinking. He had never before seen deer in Britain. He drew back his arm and flung the spear so that it drove into the side of the nearest buck. He finished it off with his knife, then wondered if Hep would be interested in it. He heard a noise

behind him, and turned. It was Valya, who had never learnt to walk quietly in the woods.

At the sight of her his exaltation mounted to unbearable heights. She was ragged, thin, and scarred; but he knew suddenly that she was the bravest and most desirable woman on earth. He held her so violently that she was frightened.

‘My vows,’ she said.

He didn’t like people who tried to advance and retreat at the same time. He didn’t offer to help her. He let her go, and stood back. ‘You can’t have your vows and me,’ he said.

‘Please hold me again,’ she said.

When it was over he lay back, exhausted, looking up at the trees, and letting the subsiding blood make poetry in his head.

Valya was quite still. He turned and looked at her with a surging pride, as though she was a picture he had painted. He tried to guess what she might be thinking, and then saw that she had fallen into a soft sleep. For a long time, while the sun moved their shadows over the brown leaves, he watched her tenderly, wondering if he had done her harm, wanting to move her and let her sleep in his arms until dark, when they would light a fire for safety, and lie together in the comfort of fulfilment.

He looked up at the sun, and then at the deer he had killed. Brown and Hep would be hungry and anxious.

He wakened her gently.

‘We must go soon,’ she muttered in her half-sleep. ‘It’s time to go on.’

‘It’s always on to somewhere,’ Grame said. ‘We’d better go back and see if Brown’s all right.’

She sat up. ‘Brown. Brown again. You think more about him than you do about me.’

‘In a different way,’ he said defensively.

‘But more.’

He bent over the deer’s carcass and tied the legs together. ‘Would you help me with this?’

‘Your self-education hasn’t taught you how to tell lies, Grame,’ she said. She watched him as he put a stick between the legs, then she put one end of the stick on her shoulder. Grame took the other, and they walked along with the body of the deer swaying between them, while she asked the back of his neck if he was happy, and why he liked Brown so much.

‘Not that I care, if you love me, Grame. You do love me? You’re not just having a woman because you need sex?’

‘No. I love you. Do you want to change shoulders?’

‘It’s not heavy. Grame, what do you see in Brown?’

For an illuminated moment, that faded too quickly for understanding, Grame saw that what he liked in Brown was himself. It was as if they looked at each other in a mirror, although which had substance and which was the reflection, he did not know.

‘I suppose,’ he said vaguely, ‘that I like him because he knew nothing and learnt a lot quickly. He’ll learn more when he has the chance—when we get back to Africa.’

‘You don’t think it would—don’t be angry, Grame—but do you think he might be made into a kind of public show? Wouldn’t he be happier here?’ she said, timidly. ‘Don’t let’s talk about that now. Grame, just once before we get back to the others, will you kiss me?’

He dropped the deer, and held her, worrying about Brown, and then needing her so violently that the rest of the world swirled into darkness. He heard Hep calling, and the world came back. He pushed her away, and they picked up the deer again and went on until they reached the fire.

Hep looked at them. ‘I was afraid you might have murdered each other,’ he said.

Brown congratulated Grame on the deer. 'I had to go a long way for it,' Grame said, and wondered instantly why he had troubled to lie. He sat down and became unnaturally absorbed in the skinning of the deer.

Valya generously went off with Hep to gather wood. Brown and Grame, alone together, concentrated on the deer.

'You're happy?' Brown asked, after a few minutes.

'Yes.'

'And hungry?'

'Yes.'

'Give me that other knife. Watch out for dogs, Grame, when you go into the woods together.'

'I will.'

'She doesn't like me. Would it be better if I went away?'

'No. You're not going away. You're coming with us.'

'They will welcome me, in Africa?'

'Certainly,' Grame said, smothering the doubt Valya had put in his mind. 'If they welcome any of us,' he added grinning. 'They may think we're not bringing back as much as we took away. We lost most of our equipment—and seven men. In their place we have a lump of coal, a fragment of stone from the city, and a few wild observations on your people.'

'In two days,' Brown promised, 'I will take you to a place where you will find enough to satisfy your elders in Africa. I think you would call it treasure.'

They cut up the deer and cooked the flesh quickly. Grame was ravenously hungry, and while he ate he talked and laughed continuously with Hep and Brown, while Valya sat quietly and scarcely ate.

They began their next day's march early in the morning and made their way unmolested, through easy country. Grame walked with Brown, talking and explaining; but when the time came to hunt he went with Valya. He was

so happy that he wanted to shout to the trees and make them shout back. It was his and Valya's best day in the forest. That evening they sat contentedly by the fire; not talking; listening to the hoot and shriek of the night birds; trying to see beyond their own circle of light; turning back gladly to the mesmerising flames.

When they woke in the morning they made a lazy start. 'We are very near the treasure I have for you,' Brown assured them, and although they thought the treasure would prove another illusion, they began to hurry, so that in only two hours they came again to a place where the forest ran on to a treeless shore.

'Now we come to what I must show you, Grame,' Brown said. 'You will be happy when you see how much there is, and when you return to Africa they will welcome you because you have brought them even one pack load of this treasure.'

They came out of the trees, and stared in unbelief at the green sea that rolled in motionless waves in front of them.

'Nothing grows here,' Brown said. 'Nothing ever will grow here.'

Valya walked forward and bent down to look. She stood up, with her hand clutching her pendant. 'So it is true,' she said.

'From here I hammered out the stones for my wife. It is the same?'

'The same,' Valya said.

'And very valuable?' Brown asked. 'A treasure for you all?'

Valya didn't answer. She turned very slowly to Grame.

'So it must have happened, here, in Britain, though it's not possible—not with that forest—they could never have been like us. And we are the first in the world—or perhaps the yellows of America are the first. But the first time in the

whole world was only this year. Oh, don't you see? This is the green melted sand that only the atomic weapon makes. It can't be here, but it must have been here. Oh, if the Britons ever knew so much, how could they be only a poor tribe to-day?'

'A big noise, a whirlwind, and the end of all the cities except the city Grame will not let me speak of,' Brown said. 'But this green stuff—it is valuable?'

'Not in the way you mean,' Grame said. 'In another way.'

'If this happened, why did anyone survive?' Hep asked.

'Only a few escaped. Some say two. Some say three, or six. I think they were on a wooden boat with some animals and it floated to the top of a hill. So they say. And others say that two were under the ground, in a place called Eden, so far down that the bang was not even heard. Then they came up and had children. I don't know what's true,' he said sadly. 'It's all what you call tradition. We live by it. What our fathers tell us to do and believe and say we do and believe and say, and what the priest tells us we are frightened not to do. We've always lived in the forest and seen no one except sometimes Yorks who come to fight. Before you came, I'd often wondered if there were other people who survived.'

'Let's leave here,' Valya said shivering. 'I won't stay in this place.'

'We'll move on,' Brown said. 'Back to the mouth of the river where you left your machine. Take as much of the green stuff as you can carry. If it is valuable in any way you will be welcomed when you bring it to Africa.'

Valya turned and ran back into the forest. Grame stooped, and with his knife chipped off a few fragments of the green stone. Then all three men walked after Valya.

She didn't accompany Grame on his hunting later that day, and at night, round the fire, he talked only to Brown,

explaining to him the relationship between the angles that occurred where one straight line crossed two straight parallel lines. For once Grame imparted his information sadly, wondering how many centuries had passed since any Briton had learnt geometry, and wondering, too, how quickly one piece of learning could lead to another.

Valya's depression vanished with the night. Over the first meal of the new day she explained to the others that the green glass desert had been created naturally, without any help from man and his weapons. She appealed to Grame, as one who knew something of physics, to agree that powerfully radiating metals could have set up a chain reaction. The process of rationalisation had made her too happy even to listen to his answer.

'But most of Europe ended too, and perhaps at the same time,' Hep protested. 'We know that the sea went over the land and stayed there. Something happened even to us around fifteen hundred years ago. Most of our people were destroyed, so far as we know—and it's admitted that the western edges of our continent were submerged. I don't believe it was a natural phenomenon—what I do believe is that once you start breaking up atoms you won't necessarily be able to stop it.'

Brown hovered on the edge of the conversation, saddened because he could not understand it. When they set off again, Grame walked beside him, trying to explain the science of physics. 'It's difficult,' he said, 'if you haven't learnt algebra. I don't think you know enough arithmetic for algebra.'

'Teach me,' Brown said, and for a few days of the hard journey Grame was happy, talking about physics and science to Brown as they walked together through the day; hunting with him for their food at dusk; teaching him arithmetic by firelight when they had eaten.

Sometimes, after the midday meal, he went into the

woods alone with Valya, where his happiness was multiplied until it stretched out into infinity. Afterwards he would lie staring at the trees, while the beauty of the forest mingled in his mind with the beauty of Valya; so that she would have been diminished by full daylight; and was glorified by the tree-trunks spinning up to raise their leaves to the sun.

Valya no longer tried to denigrate Brown. Without him, she admitted, they would have come to disaster on the long journey.

'With Brown's instinct and your sextant and compass, we always know where we are. But it doesn't make me like where we are any better.' She hated the forest. Her pleasure in Grame would have been flawless if she had been able to forget the trees and the ferocious enemies they might conceal.

On this return journey they killed another tiger; found game enough to eat; and forded two rivers, pushing Brown across on a log. As they moved nearer to the river estuary where they had left the Amphibian, the howling of the dogs became an increasing threat to their fragile happiness; at night they sat close to the fire and listened. Once Valya and Grame moved into the darkness until the fire was seen only as an elusive flicker of pink against the trees; but Valya sensed a dog in every rustle of leaves; and a prowling tiger in every small nocturnal noise. After one frightened embrace she hurried back to the fire.

They avoided the village, and forded the big river high above the mud, but there was no way of avoiding the thorn trees. For a whole day they laboured forward, with the sharp claws tearing at their skin through their ragged clothes.

'I've forgotten the exact order of things,' Hep said gloomily, 'but we're very near the point where I get eaten by mammoth ants and Grame is swallowed, more grace-

fully, by a flower. It's somewhere near here that you took your first shot at Grame, Valya.'

'This is the country that belongs to the dogs. I wouldn't like to walk here with my head full of arithmetic,' Brown said emphatically to Grame.

'If you stay by the fire you can think about arithmetic in safety,' Grame said, grinning. 'You can use paper now, not bark. We're out of the thorns and nearly home. The only thing still worth saving is Valya's last shot. You can keep that for the President, Valya, if he doesn't welcome us with flowers.'

'He'll welcome us, all right. He'll like to hear about the last time the world ended,' Hep said. 'We're going back to a country that's about to go to war. We're the kind of news that has to be suppressed.'

'Come with me, Valya, while I hunt for our last day's food,' Grame said.

When they were out of sight of the others she held out her arms to him.

He kissed her very lightly. 'It's the last day of hunting,' he said, 'so hunting first.'

She scowled. 'I might find it irritating that we always do things in your time and not in mine.'

He made a sign for silence, and walked softly forwards through the trees.

She followed him. She had learnt a little about quietness from their many days' hunting together.

Without looking back, he raised a finger as a signal for her to stop. She watched, and saw two goat-like creatures prancing incautiously through the trees, not more than fifteen yards away. The female skipped and trotted, and the horned male capered beside her like an acrobatic clown. Grame waited until they came within nine yards, then flung his spear and brought the female down. He gave a grunt of triumph. The male turned and leapt, with

its head lowered and its horns pointed like daggers at his chest. Grame swerved aside, and pulled the knife from his belt as the goat landed and wheeled. It hurled at him again, and he held the knife out, point forward, so that it killed itself quite simply, although the impact brought Grame down on his back with the dead goat on top of him.

Valya cried out, and pushed the carcase away. Grame rolled over and stood up.

'You sounded frightened,' he said accusingly.

'I thought you were dead. I've always supposed we couldn't be killed, you or me, then suddenly I saw you could. We could.'

'We could be killed any time. Don't get frightened now, Valya.'

He pulled the dagger from the dead animal. As he bent over it, she realised that he looked more like a savage every day. There was nothing left of the shy, aggressive youth she had met the first day in Africa. He was a savage now, proud of his ability to hunt and kill; indifferent to hardship; effortlessly brave. In the forest, he was magnificent. She could not imagine how his new qualities would serve in Africa.

He had cleaned his knife and spear, and now he put them down and beckoned to her. She went to him, and he kissed her scarred hands, while she thought that whatever Grame had become, she herself was not a savage. She detested the wilderness, and even for the sake of being with Grame she didn't want to delay the return to Africa by as much as half an hour.

'Soon we'll be in Africa,' he whispered. 'For ever. Not for everyone's ever. Only for our ever. Other people's ever is very different, like their now. Brown's now is to sit by the fire, doing arithmetic. Hep's is to stare at his feet, and plan the quiet life he is going to lead for his ever. Except for Hep, the people who came with us are dead. But you and I

are ten times more alive than we've ever been in our lives. When you and I get back we'll use our extra life. I think I'll go into atomic physics instead of cosmic rays.'

She shivered.

'You're going to tell me not to talk now. But I want to talk, and I want you to answer. You'll love me for all our ever, Valya?'

'Yes.'

'You won't be ashamed to marry a regraded mech-rep?'

'No.'

'You won't be afraid to tell the council you've changed your mind about dedicated virginity?'

'No. Don't talk now, Grame.' She pulled her hands away from him, and unfastened her gun belt.

'Let me be luxurious and talkative and not always in a hurry. Look at the trees, Valya. If we find the Amphibian to-morrow, this will be the last time we can lie together and look up at the leaves shaking the sky.'

'You're not a savage, after all, Grame. Would it be better if you were? I don't know if I want you wild or tame.'

'But you want me?'

'For ever. For my ever.' She came close to him.

'Closer,' he said. 'I want to feel your heart against me. Beat me with your heart until I'm what you want.'

They were lying, lost in each other, when the dog sprang. Its teeth closed on Grame's neck, and he grunted and rolled over. It snapped at his throat, and Valya flung out an arm and pushed its head aside. Grame heaved on to his feet and warded it off with his hands. It turned on Valya, who was still on the ground, and Grame plunged on its back. The man and the dog whirled over together, with the leaves whipping above them. Valya snatched her gun and ran towards them, but they were inseparable parts of the gyrating target. While she waited, the dog

broke loose, and turned again on her. Before it jumped, she fired. It fell instantly, then crawled towards her, snarling. Grame lurched downwards and drove his dagger into the dog's side. The effort pitched him forwards on his knees. He tried to get up again, and collapsed on his face.

Valya watched the blood oozing from his neck on to the leaves, then she shouted for Hep and Brown. She realised that if they hadn't heard the shot, they would not hear her voice, but she went on shouting, and in a minute or two they came.

She stood well away from Grame. She hadn't touched him since he fell.

'Carry him,' she said to them.

Brown looked at the blood on the ground. 'Carrying would not be good. We will stay. We will light a fire here, then Hep will watch you and I will bring everything from our other fire.'

Valya nodded and sat down. They thought she was going to faint, but they went quickly about the business of lighting the fire. When it was lit, she didn't speak.

They brought the goats that Grame had killed into safe range of the fire, then Brown, carrying his spear, went cautiously through the daylight darkness of the forest to bring their packs and quench the fire that they were abandoning.

When he returned, he and Hep searched the packs, but there were no medical sponges. Hep began to whistle between his teeth: he had come to rely on the medical sponges; without them, he stopped whistling to ask, how was the wound to be dressed?

Brown went to the nearest stream for water. When he came back, he dipped the end of a rag in the water.

'You can't bathe his neck with that,' Hep said. 'Boil the water.'

'Why?'

'Bacteria. You might infect the wound.'

'Bacteria?'

'Microbes. Small organisms that can poison the blood stream.'

'But this water is clean.'

'You can't see microbes.'

'Then they may not be there.'

'They are always there,' Hep shouted.

'If I'm to be afraid of the things I don't see as well as of the things I see, it's as bad as Thay,' Brown said. He put the water on the fire to boil. 'Perhaps, in spite of everything you have told me, Thay is real?'

'Damn Thay. And tear up a bit of his shirt and boil that as well.'

Brown obeyed. Neither he nor Hep could for long keep their eyes from Grame, and neither liked to look at him.

'He's losing a lot of blood,' Hep said. 'I can't strangle him to stop the bleeding. Valya. What do we do?'

She turned and looked at him with surprise, as though she had discovered him in a room she had believed to be empty. She examined him for a minute. 'Oh, Hep,' she said, in a voice of total misery. She glanced down quickly at Grame, and looked away angrily. 'I think we should cook one of those goats,' she said.

'We think he's bleeding too much,' Hep explained patiently.

'Bandage him then. Put something round his wound. But leave me alone,' Valya said frantically.

They left her alone, then, and she sat down with her back against a tree, looking over the fire into the forest. It was only the firelight glinting in her eyes that showed them she was not asleep. They bathed Grame's neck with the boiled water and bound the wound, then they roasted the fresh meat. Valya ate a little, but didn't speak to them. Before they had finished the meal, Grame moved. When

they saw he was conscious, they helped him to sit up, and offered him some meat, but he couldn't swallow. He couldn't turn his head, and from where he sat, he couldn't see Valya.

'Is she dead?' he asked.

'No.'

Grame lay back. He was hot and in pain. He tried to speak to Brown; when he found that speaking hurt too much he lay still and composed imaginary conversations in his head, but even if he began with physics the conversation led around in the end to dogs and the city. It frightened him to think that he wanted to go back to the city, and he spent the first hours of the night telling himself feverishly that he had no wish to see the city ever again. He fell asleep with the ruined buildings and the dogs and himself whirling around in his head like an accelerated world.

When he woke in the morning his head was clear and he could speak.

This time, when they helped him up he saw Valya, lying asleep with her head on her arms.

'She's conscious?' he asked.

'Yes. She's asleep. She's all right, but not talkative,' Hep said. 'Can you eat?'

'Drink.'

They gave him water.

'I made a mistake,' he said feebly. 'I should have thought of the dogs all the time. You should shoot me, Hep.'

'Except that the last shot's gone.'

'When will she be able to walk?'

'She's all right. She can walk any time she wants to,' Hep said patiently.

'I can walk now. But not well. Or far.' He closed his eyes, managed to stand up for half a minute, and was fall-

ing again when Hep caught him and lowered him to the ground.

‘If you can’t walk well you can’t defend yourself against dogs. But you’ve been bitten twice. Maybe you’re immune now,’ Hep said.

Brown was preparing the meat for breakfast. ‘This is a bad place,’ he said. ‘We will give Grame two days, then, if he can walk at all, we must leave.’

Valya had wakened, and was listening. ‘A day will be enough,’ she said. ‘To-morrow we’re going to get back to the Amphibian.’

‘And if he can’t walk to-morrow?’ Brown asked. ‘Do we carry him? It would be better to wait.’

‘A day will be enough,’ Valya said, and sat down again with her back to the tree. For the first hour or two of the day, Grame waited for her to speak to him. She walked near him once, but with her eyes averted. He knew she didn’t like weakness, and he decided that she hated him for being wounded and unable to move. He turned all his mind to the purpose of being able to walk again. He lay still all the day and night, not wasting his energy on speech, and in the morning when they asked him if he could walk he said only: ‘Yes.’

He walked with his left arm hanging stiff, his throat on fire, and a spear in his right hand. The ground rocked under his feet and the trees swung loosely in front of him. In his mind, an evasive memory, was an impression that others made their way beside him, but his reason was skimming along too fast, like a sailing boat in a strong wind, and he had no concentration to spare for memories. He walked without speaking for three hours, then the wind in his head whirled up to gale strength, and he fell unconscious.

The others tried to make him comfortable, then went through the exhausting, protective gesture of lighting a fire

while they waited for him to recover. This perpetual lighting of fires was as though three times a day for ever they had to walk up and down ten flights of stairs to lock the door. Valya watched him with the concentration of a surgeon wondering how far he dare sut. Even before Brown, she saw his first movement. Quarter of an hour later she said: 'He must walk again. We're nearly there.'

Grame stood up and walked through the clouds that entangled his feet. He had no idea where he was going to or why he must go. Walking had become an involuntary act, like breathing.

They came to the bank of the river, and went on walking. Grame lurched from side to side; Brown and Hep tried to support him, but he fell continually.

'We must stop, Valya. You'll kill him,' Hep said.

'We must go on,' she said, without looking back.

'No,' Brown said. 'He won't like to go back dead. You may go on, and leave him here with me.'

Valya waved her hand across the river. 'There. Do you see the blackened forest? Grame burnt it, the day we landed.' She hurried on, and called back. 'I see it. I see the Amphibian.'

They dragged Grame to where she stood, as radiant as a woman meeting her lover.

'I knew I was right,' she said. 'It's there. It's really there. Now all we have to do is cross the river.'

'Grame will not cross the river to-day,' Brown stated.

'No, Valya,' Hep said, staring at the Amphibian.

'We must make a raft and float him across,' Valya said.

'Grame will lie here,' Brown said. 'I will stay with him to-night. You and Hep go on.'

'Count me out,' Hep said. 'I'll stay too.'

'We are sleeping on the Amphibian to-night,' Valya said, not paying too much attention to them, as though they were children whispering at the back of the class.

'If you will,' Brown said. 'But not Grame.'

'We're counting on Grame to fly us back,' Hep said wearily. 'A corpse couldn't do it.'

'Didn't you learn from Grame everything he knew?' Valya said impatiently.

'No. I might manage to move the controls if he told me which to move. Just the way you go through the ordinary motions of being a human being without really knowing anything about it.'

'What do you mean?' Valya asked, still looking across the river.

'If you could fly that machine yourself you'd leave him here rather than wait a day.'

'But I'm dying here. I think I've died. The only life is far away from this place. I'm like these branches that have fallen from the trees to rot in the river. Once I wasn't afraid, but I'm decaying with fear now. Can't you understand, Hep? I've got to get back, or else I've ended for ever. Perhaps one more hour in the forest will do it. I can't risk it. We must cross the river now.'

'More than ever,' Hep said, 'I need a drink.' He leant against a tree, considering, looking down occasionally at Grame and the blood-stained bandage round his neck. Grame was unconscious again. The only part of him that moved or gave evidence that he was alive was the blood that pushed steadily from the open wound through the sodden rag.

'Valya. We'll light a fire for them. Another fire. Then we'll make a raft and take all our stuff over to the Amphibian, and check, as far as I can, that it's all right. I'm not sure what I mean by that, perhaps only that if there was a wild elephant looking for its mate in the cabin, I'd notice. We might find some equipment had been left—perhaps a tin of that meat that used to make me sick before we had to eat burnt goat and stewed rat. And suppose

there were some medical sponges! Anyway, we'll go over, then come back to Grame and Brown. I'd just like to add that my position is not open to argument. I won't help to move Grame to-day, because I refuse to co-operate in murder; and I won't leave Grame alone with Brown to-night, because it takes two people to watch a fire and a man who may be dying.'

'Another night in the forest!' She looked down at Grame angrily. 'Very well. We'll wait and wait. And wait. We won't even cross the river now. I couldn't do it, and then come back.'

They waited for two days, while Grame struggled to get better, like a man who has dived to the bottom of a lake and swims up for a long time before the pressure lessens and the surface is broken. Hep and Brown looked after him, and Valya stood staring across the river at the Amphibian, listening to the howling of the dogs that came to their ears sometimes like a distant wind in the trees.

It was only when Grame spoke again that she bent over him, almost tenderly, and said that they would leave in the morning of the next day. The past three days were buried in Grame's mind like a corpse that had to be concealed, with the earth stamped hard above it. He had no reason he knew of to be surprised by her look of affection.

She and Hep prepared a raft that night, and in the morning they ferried the supplies across.

Grame stood on his feet, watching them go, then turned, unsteadily, putting out his hand for Brown's support.

'I'm not coming with you to Africa,' Brown said. 'You have a woman now. Or I think you have a woman. I don't know. But what you know, Grame, is that I came to this place only for you. I don't think you need me now. So I'm going back to my own people. I think they'll be quiet, now, for a little. The bang you made was bigger than the priest's threats. Perhaps the priest and I will become friends. That's

another thing I don't know. But I can't make the others learn quickly without the help of the priest. So I am not coming with you.'

Grame looked at him, with inadequacy in his throat.

'You believe I could let you stay?' he asked miserably. 'Alone? Without me? If you stay, I'll have to stay too.'

'But you want to go back?'

'Half. Only half.'

'Then you are in two pieces,' Brown pointed out. 'That's not a good way for a man. Do you need me—and the forest?'

'Yes.'

'Do you need Valya and Africa?'

'Yes.'

Brown waited.

'I need Valya more,' Grame said.

'That is true. If you come back—to take our land, perhaps—you will remember me and I will remember you. Now I will watch your flying machine rise and think of you as it goes. Tell Hep and Valya I am sad to leave them. But not like leaving you. Good-bye, Grame.'

He listened to the others as they came up from the bank of the river, then walked away into the trees, his spear balanced lightly in his right hand.

Grame felt pain rising in his chest, and crushed it down viciously. He turned to Hep and Valya as they came near.

'He's gone,' he said flatly. 'He said to tell you he was sad to leave you. Now get me across the river and I'll try to fly the Amphibian.'

'Brown gone? Why?' Hep asked stupidly.

'He's gone!' Grame shouted. 'Gone! Gone! Gone! Now take me across the river.'

They pushed him across on the raft and lifted him into the flying machine. While Hep was loosening the anchor ropes, Valya spoke.

‘Before we start, Grame, I want to tell you the truth, and ask you to do one thing for me.’

‘If the truth’s what I think it’s going to be, don’t bother to tell me. It would be insulting to suppose I can’t guess what you mean.’

‘Oh, Grame, I can’t help it. I’ve been disloyal, but I’m still a Bride of the State. I don’t want to be anything else.’

‘We were to love for ever—our ever,’ Grame said, and for once he allowed his voice to plead.

‘Grame, I couldn’t. Not again. When I think of you and being with you, I think of the dog, and I want to scream and run away. I deserve it. I should never have been disloyal. I’m guilty for ever. I deserved the dog. Grame. I want to ask you—never to say what happened. I know men don’t—but suppose they do? It would be the end of my public life.’

Grame looked back at the forest.

‘So I can bury you there as well as Brown,’ he said. ‘I’ve no reason to be proud and no reason to talk. Where’s Hep? We’d better start. It’s too late to go back and there’s no reason to go on. Where’s Hep?’

Hep climbed into the plane and walked forward to Grame.

‘Would it be an idea to stay where we are, in the machine for ever?’ Grame asked.

Valya found his voice frightening. ‘We must go on,’ she said quickly.

‘Then give me a hand,’ Grame said. ‘We’ll work it together, Hep. I move this and press that. Do you care if we crash, Hep? How could you? But of course things are different for you, because you’ve kept yourself apart. And so, only on your account, I think, we mustn’t crash. And now I pull this lever. My hopes are with you, Hep.’

The Amphibian rose smoothly into the upper air, and then beat forwards, southwards, towards Africa. They

didn't know if they would ever arrive; if they would be welcomed as conquerors; honoured for the discovery of the green glass; or punished by exemplary death. They flew on into uncertainty.

Brown, sitting alone in the forest, looked at the soaring machine with his heart rising up, while he dreamed of the future when Britain might raise itself, generation by generation, to become a nation that would conquer the earth.

THE END